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ISSUE



## Naxalism to End by March 31, 2026: Amit Shah Credits CRPF for Crushing 'Red Terror'

Home Minister says Left-Wing Extremism has been broken in three years; hails force's sacrifices at 87th Raising Day parade in Guwahati

HT NEWS DESK / AGENCIES

**GUWAHATI, FEB 21:** Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Saturday declared that Naxalism will be completely eliminated from India by March 31, 2026, asserting that security forces have "broken the back" of Left-Wing Extremism in just three years. Addressing the 87th Raising Day parade of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) in Guwahati, Shah credited the force and its elite Commando Battalion for Resolute Action (CoBRA) unit for playing the most crucial role in dismantling Maoist networks that once spread across 12 states.



Hills along the Chhattisgarh-Telangana border, Shah said 31 Naxals were killed during a 21-day operation conducted under extremely challenging conditions, with temperatures touching 45 degrees Celsius. He said the jawans did not retreat even an

inch while dismantling a key Maoist stronghold.

The Home Minister underlined that India's internal security cannot be imagined without the CRPF, which began in 1939 with just two battalions and today has grown into the world's largest Central Armed Police Force with 248 battalions and over 3.25 lakh personnel. He noted that since its inception, 2,270 CRPF personnel have laid down their lives in the line of duty.

Shah said that 11-12 years ago, three regions — Jammu and Kashmir, Left-Wing Extremism-affected areas and the Northeast — had become major internal security challenges. Today, he claimed, peace has been established in all three.

He stated that after the abrogation of Article 370, not a single bullet had to be fired in Jammu and Kashmir and stone-

## India's future strength rooted in today's tech growth: PM Modi

HT NEWS DESK / AGENCIES

**NEW DELHI, FEB 21:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Saturday, participated in the groundbreaking ceremony of HCL-Foxconn Semiconductor Unit in Uttar Pradesh, via video conferencing.

The ceremony marks a historic milestone in India's journey toward becoming a global semiconductor hub, following closely on the heels of the Global AI Impact Summit held in New Delhi.

Addressing the gathering, the Prime Minister emphasized that India is working towards the aim of Viksit Bharat rapidly. "I have said from the ramparts of the Red Fort, India has no time to stop or pause. Since the beginning of 2026, India has accelerated its pace," the Prime Minister remarked.

Modi cited the recent milestones such as the Viksit Bharat Young Leaders Dialogue, National Startup Day which energized the start up revolution in India, and the India Energy Summit through which India's strength caught the attention of the world.

Prime Minister noted that the Budget for Viksit Bharat has injected fresh momentum into the nation's progress, making this a truly historic



week for India. He highlighted that at the Global AI Impact Summit, world leaders, heads of state, and tech giants gathered to witness India's AI capabilities, ultimately recognizing and praising the country's strategic vision.

He remarked that immediately following the conclusion of the AI summit yesterday, the nation is already moving forward today with this massive program to strengthen India's semiconductor ecosystem. "India is now striving to stand alongside the world's top nations in providing the processing power required to run the

### Terror Alert in Capital: Security Blanket Thrown Over Red Fort, Chandni Chowk After Intelligence Warning

HT NEWS DESK / AGENCIES

**NEW DELHI, FEB 21:** Security was tightened across prominent religious and heritage sites in the national capital on Saturday following intelligence inputs about a possible terror threat. Areas around the Red Fort and parts of Chandni Chowk witnessed heightened vigil, with additional forces deployed and intensive surveillance underway. According to officials, central intelligence agencies flagged a potential explosion threat near the Red Fort, a

Turn on Page 2

### Vice-President to Grace KU's 21st Convocation on Feb 26; Over 59,000 Degrees to Be Awarded

Maiden Valley visit of VP C. P. Radhakrishnan adds significance as LG Manoj Sinha, CM Omar Abdullah to attend ceremony

HT NEWS NETWORK

**SRINAGAR, FEB 21:** The University of Kashmir (KU) is set to host its 21st Convocation on February 26, 2026, at the varsity's Convocation Complex, marking a landmark academic occasion for the institution and thousands of graduating students.

The Hon'ble Vice-President of India, C. P. Radhakrishnan, will attend the ceremony as Chief Guest and deliver the convocation address. The visit will be his maiden official trip to the Valley after assuming office, lending special significance to the event. The convocation will be presided over by Manoj Sinha, Lieutenant Governor of

Jammu and Kashmir and Chancellor of KU, while Omar Abdullah, Chief Minister of J&K and Pro-Chancellor of KU, will attend as Guest of Honour. Minister for Higher Education Sakina Masood Itoo, senior civil and police officials, faculty members and university administrators are also

Turn on Page 2

### J&K Gets Major Super-Specialty Boost as NMC Clears 24 New PG Seats

HT NEWS NETWORK

**JAMMU, FEB 21:** In a significant push to specialised medical education in Jammu and Kashmir, the National Medical Commission (NMC) has approved 24 new super-specialty postgraduate (PG) seats for Government Medical College, Jammu, Government Medical College, Srinagar and Sher-i-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences (SKIMS) Saura.

The newly sanctioned seats span key super-specialty streams including Cardiology, Urology, Pulmonary Medicine, Medical Gastroenterology, Paediatric Surgery, Neuro-Anaesthesia, Paediatric and Neonatal Anaesthesia, and Clinical

Turn on Page 2

### Chenab Bridge: The Project Afcons Refused to Abandon in 2008 - A Gamble That Built the World's Highest Rail Span

HT NEWS DESK / AGENCIES

**NEW DELHI, FEB 21:** When the ambitious Chenab Rail Bridge project was thrown into uncertainty in 2008, Afcons Infrastructure Limited was given a clear option — walk away without consequences. The Railway Board had

Turn on Page 2



### Shantmanu Takes Oath As J&K SEC, Hints At Holding Local Body Elections

HT NEWS NETWORK

**JAMMU, FEB 21:** Former bureaucrat Shantmanu, who was on Saturday sworn in as the State Election Commissioner of Jammu and Kashmir for a five-year term, underscored the importance of holding the long-pending panchayat and urban local body elections in the Union Territory.

Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha administered the oath of office to the retired IAS officer at a ceremony held at Lok Bhavan here. The oath-taking ceremony was

Turn on Page 2



### Staggered School Timings Proposed to Ease Srinagar Traffic Crunch

Move aimed at easing Ramadan rush, say DC, SSP Traffic

HT NEWS NETWORK / KNO

**SRINAGAR, FEB 21:** Anticipating a sharp rise in vehicular movement with the reopening of schools, colleges and offices, traffic authorities in Srinagar have proposed staggered timings for educational institutions

to ease peak-hour congestion across key city routes, officials said.

They said the proposal gains significance amid Ramadan, when Sehri and Iftari hours already witness heavy traffic load, particularly along the Barzulla healthcare corridor. Speaking to reporters in Srinagar,

the SSP Traffic City Aijaz Ahmad Bhat, as reported by the news agency—Kashmir News Observer (KNO), said a magnetised Bund road has been developed in Barzulla to improve connectivity to the newly constructed hospital block in the area. "The alternate Bund road has been

completed in its first phase and is now functional. A ramp is also being proposed to create additional parking space, which will improve overall mobility," Bhat said.

He said the authorities are working on connecting the new Barzulla

Turn on Page 2

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### Srinagar Hits Record 21°C in February, Valley Warms Unusually

HT NEWS NETWORK

**SRINAGAR, FEB 21:** Srinagar on Saturday recorded its highest-ever maximum temperature for the month of February, touching 21.0°C and breaking a decade-old record. As per details, previous all-time February record of 20.6°C was registered on February 24, 2016. What makes the development more striking is the sharp deviation from normal, with today's temperature standing a massive 10.0°C above the seasonal average an extraordinary anomaly for late winter in the Kashmir Valley, details stated. According to Kashmir Weather, the spike is part of a broader and intensifying

Turn on Page 2

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**Naxalism to.....**

pelting incidents have dropped to zero. He added that development and industrial activity are now expanding in the region, with contributions from the CRPF, BSF and the Jammu and Kashmir Police.

Highlighting sacrifices made across conflict zones, Shah said 700 CRPF personnel were killed in the Northeast, 780 in Naxal-affected areas and 540 in Jammu and Kashmir. "Without these sacrifices, it would have been impossible to bring these regions onto the path of development," he said.

Fourteen CRPF jawans were awarded the Police Medal for Gallantry on the occasion, five officers received the President's Police Medal for Distinguished Service and five battalions were honoured for outstanding performance.

The parade — the first CRPF Raising Day celebration held in the Northeast — featured eight contingents drawn from across the country, including women personnel, Rapid Action Force units and CoBRA commandos. Tactical demonstrations such as rifle drills, a simulated hostage-rescue operation and a jungle-warfare exercise drew sustained applause from the audience.

Shah concluded by asserting that the era of bomb blasts, bandhs and blockades in former hotspots is giving way to stability and growth, expressing confidence that India will soon be entirely free from "red terror."

**India's future.....**

modern world and is working simultaneously on software and hardware aspects", Modi emphasised.

The Prime Minister reiterated his vision of the current decade as India's Techade, stating that investments in Green Energy, Space Tech, Digital Technology, and AI will form the foundation of 21st-century capability. He further stated that India is making unprecedented investments today in every technology that will determine the future of humanity and development of this robust semiconductor ecosystem in India is a prime example of this.

Highlighting the strategic importance of chips, the Prime Minister compared their value in the 21st century to oil in the 20th century. "During the Corona pandemic, the world saw the fragility of the chip supply chain. When supply hit a brake, global economies faltered", Modi noted.

He highlighted that India learned from that crisis to turn it into an opportunity and decided that India must become self-reliant in chip manufacturing. "Today's programme is a reflection of this vision", Modi emphasised.

Prime Minister stated that "Made-in-India" chips are the backbone of a Viksit Bharat, powering critical sectors from AI and 6G to Defense and EVs. To support this vision, he highlighted the Chips to Startup initiative, set to train 85,000 specialists, alongside Budget-led advancements like the Semiconductor Mission's second phase and the establishment of Rare Earth Corridors for end-to-end R&D and manufacturing support.

As a Member of Parliament from Uttar Pradesh, the Prime Minister expressed immense pride in the state's transformation. "UP is becoming a major center for the semiconductor ecosystem, which will bring design houses, R&D centers, and startup ecosystems to the region, creating vast employment opportunities for the youth", Shri Modi noted.

Prime Minister underscored that in the last 11 years, India has witnessed a monumental shift in its industrial landscape, with electronics manufacturing growing six-fold. "This growth is most evident in the mobile revolution, where domestic production has increased 28-fold and exports have surged by a staggering 100-fold", he added.

Modi remarked that Uttar Pradesh has emerged as a powerhouse and a strong pillar in this success story, currently accounting for more than half of all mobile phones manufactured in the country. This transformation marks a significant milestone in India's journey toward becoming a global manufacturing hub.

The Prime Minister credited the "Double-Engine Government" for changing the identity of Uttar Pradesh from a state once associated with crime and migration to one known for Expressways, Defense Corridors, and world-class infrastructure like the Jewar International Airport and Dedicated Freight Corridors. "Global investors are coming to UP because they know their investment is guaranteed a fantastic return," the Prime Minister said.

Modi also announced that he would be inaugurating the Delhi-Meerut Namu Bharat Train Corridor tomorrow, further boosting the region's connectivity.

Concluding his address, the Prime Minister thanked HCL Technologies Chairperson Roshni Nadar and Foxconn Semiconductor Business Group President Bob Chen for their partnership. He noted that Foxconn's presence sends a global

message: "A democratic India is a trusted partner. Our participation in the value chain increases its resilience, a win-win for India and the world."

**Terror Alert in.....**

high-security zone and major tourist attraction. Sources indicated that a temple in the Chandni Chowk area could be among the possible targets. The suspected plan reportedly involves the use of an improvised explosive device (IED).

The alert comes amid inputs suggesting that Pakistan-based terror outfit Lashkar-e-Taiba has allegedly included prominent religious places in India on its target list. Agencies are also examining claims that the move may be linked to attempts to avenge the February 6 blast at a mosque in Islamabad.

While the intelligence inputs are being verified, security agencies have intensified CCTV monitoring, vehicle checks and patrolling in crowded public areas. Bomb disposal squads, dog squads and Quick Reaction Teams have been stationed at strategic locations, with Delhi Police and central agencies maintaining close coordination.

The alert follows the deadly November 10, 2025 car explosion near the Red Fort area that left 13 people dead and over 20 injured, triggering widespread concern over security in the densely populated Old Delhi zone.

Officials have urged citizens to remain vigilant and immediately report any suspicious object or activity to authorities, emphasizing that the measures are precautionary and there is no cause for panic.

**Vice-President.....**

expected to be present. Expressing her delight over the upcoming convocation, Vice-Chancellor Prof. Nilofer Khan termed it a "moment of collective pride" for the university community, celebrating the academic accomplishments of students and reaffirming KU's commitment to quality education, research and public engagement. She said the presence of the Vice-President reflects growing national recognition of the university's academic and research contributions.

Held under the provisions of the Kashmir University Act, 1969, the convocation will formally confer degrees, gold medals and certificates of merit upon deserving students and scholars. A total of 59,558 degrees will be awarded, including 44,910 undergraduate, 13,545 postgraduate, 461 MD/MS, four MCh, 18 M.Phil and 620 Ph.D degrees.

The University of Kashmir continues to strengthen its academic profile at the national level. It is the only university from Jammu and Kashmir to feature among the top 50 universities in the country, holds NAAC A++ accreditation, ranks 34th in NIRF, and is placed among the top eight State Public Universities in India. With the highest enrollment among State and Central Universities in the UT, the varsity primarily serves local learners while also attracting students from outside the region.

University authorities, in collaboration with the UT administration, have made comprehensive arrangements to ensure the smooth conduct of the ceremony, which is expected to witness wide participation from the academic community and invited guests.

**J&K Gets Major.....**

Immunology and Rheumatology, significantly expanding advanced training opportunities within the Union Territory.

Welcoming the development, Health and Medical Education Minister Sakeena Itoo termed it a major milestone in the government's efforts to transform Jammu and Kashmir into a hub of medical excellence. She said the expansion reflects the commitment of the government led by Chief Minister Omar Abdullah to elevate healthcare standards and ensure that specialised services are accessible within the region.

The Minister said the addition of super-specialty PG seats will empower young doctors to pursue advanced training locally, while also enhancing patient care by reducing the need for referrals outside J&K. She emphasised that the move aligns with the broader vision of strengthening the healthcare ecosystem and ensuring timely, high-quality treatment closer to home.

Acknowledging the efforts of faculty members, medical college administrations and the Health Department, she said their compliance with NMC standards made the approval possible. Reiterating the government's commitment to investing in medical education and infrastructure, the Minister said the expansion marks another important step in ongoing healthcare reforms aimed at building world-class specialised healthcare facilities in Jammu and Kashmir.

**Chenab Bridge.....**

suspended the work for over 90 days amid legal and environmental challenges, and even suggested the company could exit if it wished.

But the company stayed. The steel arch bridge, soaring 359 metres above the Chenab riverbed — 35 metres taller than the Eiffel Tower — is today the world's highest railway bridge. Spanning 1,315 metres, it forms the most dramatic stretch of the 272-km Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla Railway Link (USBRL), finally connecting Kashmir to the national rail network.

Afcons Executive Chairman K. Subramanian recalled that during the crisis, the Railway Board's member (engineering) told him this was the company's opportunity to withdraw. The matter had reached the Supreme Court, and an alternative tunnel alignment was under consideration. Financial losses loomed large.

Subramanian said he returned to discuss the situation with then chairman Cyrus Mistry. The two debated extensively before deciding that abandoning the project could make its completion even more difficult. They believed the Chenab bridge had unmatched international engineering significance — no structure of such scale had been conceptualised or built elsewhere in the world.

At the end of their discussion, Mistry asked a simple question: "Are you confident?" The response was firm — "We will deliver."

The original alignment was eventually restored after the Supreme Court proceedings, and construction resumed. Along the way, new technical requirements, including additional blast-load specifications, were incorporated. The bridge's design evolved as engineers adapted to extreme terrain, seismic sensitivity, high winds and unprecedented structural demands.

The project, awarded in 2004 and completed in 2025, reached its defining moment when Prime Minister Narendra Modi flagged off the Vande Bharat Express between Katra and Srinagar, marking the operationalisation of the iconic arch bridge.

From near-withdrawal to global recognition, the Chenab Bridge stands today not just as a record-breaking structure, but as a testament to a decision taken in uncertainty — a refusal to retreat when the easier option was to walk away.

**Shantmanu Takes.....**

attended by Chief Minister Omar Abdullah and his cabinet colleagues, including Deputy Chief Minister Surinder Choudhary and Speaker Abdul Rahim Rather. Chief Secretary Atal Dulloo and Director General of Police Nalin Prabhat were also present.

Talking to news agency, Shantmanu said it was a matter of "great happiness and pride" to take over the responsibility.

Referring to the pending panchayat and urban local body elections, he said, "These elections are vital pillars of our democratic framework, particularly in strengthening decentralised governance and grassroots development. Since they have not been held for some time now, it becomes all the more important." "I am happy to formally begin my responsibilities. I will work with full commitment to ensure effective discharge of my duties," he said.

While the tenure of municipal councils ended in October-November 2023, the panchayats and block development councils completed their five-year term on January 9, 2024. With the tenures of district development councils ending on February 24, there will be essentially no elected local bodies functioning in Jammu and Kashmir.

Officials said local body elections could not be conducted on time due to multiple factors, including the delimitation exercise and the reservation of wards for Other Backward Classes.

Recently, Chief Minister Omar Abdullah had said that his government was making necessary arrangements to hold these elections at the earliest, but the vacancy of the State Election Commissioner was a major hurdle.

Under the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act and relevant Municipal Acts, the State Election Commission holds the authority to prepare electoral rolls and conduct local elections.

On February 17, Jammu and Kashmir Lieutenant Governor appointed Shantmanu as the new State Election Commissioner for a period of five years or till he attains the age of 70 years, whichever is earlier.

Shantmanu, a 1991-batch officer of the AGMUT cadre who recently retired as additional chief secretary and financial commissioner in Jammu and Kashmir, replaced B R Sharma who completed his tenure in April 2024. (Agencies)

**Staggered.....**

block to Chanpora via the Bund. "The DPR has been forwarded by R&B authorities, and the work is expected to be completed within the current financial year," the SSP said, adding that the proposed stretch will extend towards the right

bank and link with Sanat Nagar, creating an alternative traffic corridor. Deputy Commissioner (DC) Srinagar, Akshay Labroo, who also spoke with the media, said decongesting hospital zones remains a top priority, particularly around Government Medical College Srinagar and Bone and Joint Hospital Srinagar, which witness heavy daily inflow of patients and attendants.

"To ease pressure on SMHS and super-specialty areas, an alternate Sonwar route has been developed. The work is progressing rapidly and is expected to divert nearly half of the existing traffic, ensuring quicker access for patients," he said.

At the Bone and Joint Hospital in Barzulla, three major interventions are underway. The first phase of the alternate Bund road has been completed.

Secondly, work has begun on creating an alternate entry point from the Bund side to facilitate trauma patients, doctors and medical staff.

"Once completed, the hospital will not have to rely solely on the main road for access. This will significantly reduce bottlenecks," the DC Srinagar said.

Additionally, an alternate parking facility is being planned from the Bund road, with a ramp and allied infrastructure to allow hospital staff to park vehicles without adding to roadside congestion.

Both the DC Srinagar and SSP Traffic said the Barzulla underpass has been completed for light motor vehicles (LMVs) and cleared by the traffic authorities.

"The underpass will now be made operational for LMVs, which will help decongest traffic from Bulbul Bagh and adjoining areas," the DC said, adding that heavy vehicles will not be permitted.

With schools, colleges, and offices set to reopen and traffic flow expected to surge, especially during Sehri and Ifhari hours in Ramadan, the Traffic Department has proposed staggered timings for educational institutions.

"We have submitted the proposal to the government. If approved, it will substantially ease peak-hour pressure across key city routes," SSP Traffic said—(KNO)

**Srinagar Hits.....**

warm spell across the region. With dry conditions expected to persist and no major Western Disturbance forecast in the coming days, maximum temperatures are likely to rise further. Weather observers have indicated that additional long-standing February records could fall across other parts of Kashmir before the month ends, placing February 2026 among the warmest if not the warmest on record.

Maximum Temperatures Recorded Today, In the Kashmir region, Srinagar recorded 21.0°C (10.0°C above normal), Qazigund 20.0°C (9.9°C above normal), Pahalgam 17.2°C (9.7°C above normal), Kupwara 20.0°C (9.9°C above normal), Kokernag 18.3°C (9.5°C above normal) and Gulmarg 11.5°C (9.5°C above normal).

In the Jammu region, Jammu recorded 25.2°C (2.9°C above normal), Banihal 19.8°C (6.7°C above normal), Batote 19.9°C (7.3°C above normal), Bhandarwah 21.3°C (7.1°C above normal) and Katra 25.0°C (4.9°C above normal).

In Ladakh, Leh recorded 8.3°C, Kargil 9.9°C and Nubra Valley 10.4°C.

Meteorologists have termed the deviation highly unusual for February and are closely monitoring evolving conditions across Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh. (KNC)

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## DC Srinagar, Principal GMC Reviews Key Works at Barzulla

■ HT NEWS NETWORK

**SRINAGAR, FEB 21:** Deputy Commissioner (DC) Srinagar, Akshay Labroo along with the Principal of Government Medical College Srinagar, Dr Iffat Shah and SSP Traffic Srinagar, Aijaz Ahmad Bhat on Saturday conducted a comprehensive spot inspection to review traffic decongestion measures and infrastructure upgradation works around Bone and Joint Hospital Barzulla.

The visit aimed at assessing the progress of various interventions undertaken to streamline vehicular movement and improve accessibility for patients, attendants and staff visiting the hospital.

During the inspection, the Deputy Commissioner and the Principal GMC Srinagar reviewed the development of an alternate entry gate to the Bone & Joint Hospital, construction of ramps and small Link Road connecting the main road with the Parking facilities through the Bund side

along Bone and Joint Hospital Barzulla aimed at reducing congestion at the main gate and ensuring smooth passage for ambulances and other emergency vehicles.

They also undertook an on-site assessment of the new parking facility to address space constraints in the area. In addition, the Officers examined the progress of works related to the improvement of hospital entry and exit points to minimize bottlenecks to reduce roadside congestion, particularly during peak hours.

The DC along with the officers also took first-hand appraisal of newly constructed underpass connecting alternate access road of Bone and Joint Hospital Barzulla and assess on ground traffic flow and pedestrian movement.

On the occasion, the Deputy Commissioner directed the concerned departments to work in close coordination and adhere to set timelines to ensure early completion of the works to facil-



itate safe pedestrian movement and reduce traffic interruptions in the larger public interest.

The DC emphasized that the combined measures including alternate access, enhanced parking space and improved traffic management will significantly

streamline traffic flow and ensure hassle-free patient access to the hospital.

The DC stated that the District Administration has pushed various traffic decongestion measures on priority across Srinagar, particularly around major health-

care institutions including SMHS Hospital and Super Specialty Hospital with the objective of easing patient movement and reducing congestion in surrounding areas. He added that the administration is committed to strengthening healthcare accessibility and improving traffic management infrastructure for the convenience and safety of citizens, besides for convenience of the doctors and staff working in Hospitals.

Administrator GMC, Srinagar, Mohammad Ashraf Hakak; Additional Deputy Commissioner, Mir Imtiyaz Ul Aziz; Additional Deputy Commissioner, Aadil Fareed; Chief Planning Officer, Fayaz Ahmad Dar; Superintending Engineer R&B Tatheer Manzoor; Executive Engineer R&B, Khalid Mehmood; Tehsildar South Sajjad, Tehsildar, Chanapora, Kifayat Ali; Medical Superintendent Bone & Joint Hospital, Dr. Adil and other concerned officers and officials accompanied the Deputy Commissioner during the visit.

### H&H Department Holds Capacity Building Programme on Design, Packaging and Branding Under RAMP Scheme

■ FAROOQ RATHER

**KULGAM, FEB 21:** In a significant move to strengthen the competitiveness of local artisans and producer groups, the Handicrafts and Handloom (H&H) Department Kulgam on Friday organized a one-day capacity building programme on Design, Packaging and Branding at the Conference Hall, Mini Secretariat Kulgam.

The programme was conducted under the RAMP (Raising & Accelerating MSME Performance) Scheme and focused on artisans, weavers, and other producer groups engaged in GI (Geographical Indication), ODOP (One District One Product), and DEH (District Export Hub) products of the Kashmir division. The event witnessed enthusiastic participation from over 100 artisans, weavers, and representatives of producer groups from across the district, reflecting the growing interest among stakeholders in enhancing product quality and market reach.

Experts in design and marketing from Jammu & Kashmir Entrepreneurship Development Institute (JKEDI) Kulgam delivered comprehensive presentations highlighting the importance of value addition through improved and eco-friendly packaging, standardized labelling practices, and effective brand creation. The experts emphasized that modern packaging and strong branding strategies are essential to compete in national and international markets. During the programme, participants were sensitized about the increasing role of social media platforms and e-commerce channels in promoting traditional Kashmiri crafts. The resource persons elaborated on how digital marketing tools can help artisans directly connect with customers, expand their market base, and enhance profitability.

An interactive session was also held, during which participants shared their experiences, challenges, and suggestions regarding product marketing and packaging. Artisans raised concerns related to limited access to modern packaging materials, lack of branding awareness, and difficulties in reaching wider markets. Officials assured the participants that the department would continue to provide technical guidance and institutional support to address these issues.

## JKAACL Celebrates International Mother Language Day at Tagore Hall

Academy Reaffirms Commitment to Promotion of Mother Tongue

■ JAMEEL ANSARI

**SRINAGAR, FEB 21:** Marking the observance of International Mother Language Day, the Jammu & Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages organised a dignified literary function at the Conference Hall of Tagore Hall, Srinagar.

The day is observed to promote awareness about the preservation, promotion and significance of mother tongues, as a mother language represents the cultural identity, intellectual foundation and civilisational continuity of the people.

The Cultural Academy organised the event in this spirit of responsibility to highlight the importance of the Kashmiri language and to encourage the younger generation to remain connected with their linguistic and cultural roots.

The function was presided over by noted educationist, writer and poet Prof. Shad Ramzan. In his presidential address, he described the mother tongue as the cornerstone of a nation's cultural identity and intellectual heritage. He emphasised that languages are the custodians of a society's history, traditions and collective consciousness, and therefore their preservation and promotion is the need of the hour.

On the occasion, eminent scholars presented detailed papers on the importance of mother languages. Dr. Ghulam Nabi Haleem delivered the keynote address, highlighting the



vital role of the mother tongue in shaping cultural identity and stressing the need to promote Kashmiri both at home and in educational institutions.

Renowned fiction writer Mushtaq Ahmad Mushtaq spoke about the contemporary challenges faced by the Kashmiri language and reflected on its future, observing that digital platforms and literary initiatives offer new opportunities for the growth and wider reach of the language.

A Mushaira (Poetry Session) was also organised during the function, in which poets from different parts of the Valley presented their verses. Themes of love for the mother tongue, cultural identity and social consciousness prominently featured in the recitations.

Among the poets who participated were Touseef Raza, Dr. Mohammad Idrees Badrani, Riyaz Rabbani, Sagar Sarfaraz, Azam Farooq, Shahzad Man-

zoor, Muzaffar Dilbar, Tauheeda Naz, Nighat Nasreen, Mehfoza Nabi, Parvez Mir, Javaid Qalami, Tahir Riyaz Reshi, Muzaffar Ghazaal, Qais Bilal and Ameen Ashraf.

Earlier, Jawaid Iqbal Khan, Editor Kashmiri, welcomed the guests and stated that the mother tongue is the soul of a nation and the foundation of its intellectual and cultural life. He added that the Cultural Academy has been consistently working for the promotion of Kashmiri language and literature through publications, literary programmes, translations and various cultural initiatives.

The proceedings of the function were conducted by Dr. Gulzar Ahmad, Assistant Editor Kashmiri. The programme concluded with a formal vote of thanks, by Maqbool Sajid Research Assistant marking the end of a meaningful and enriching literary gathering dedicated to the celebration and promotion of the mother tongue.

## Voices of Identity: HSS Dangarpora Sopore Celebrates Mother Tongue Day with Fervour

■ AASHIQ HUSSAIN

**DANGERPORA, FEB 21:** HSS Dangarpora observed International Mother Tongue Day with remarkable enthusiasm and intellectual vibrancy, reaffirming its commitment to the preservation and promotion of linguistic heritage.

The event was presided over by Principal Mr. Mushtaq Sopori, who addressed a distinguished gathering comprising academicians, scholars, and members of the school faculty. In his eloquent and insightful

speech, he underscored the significance of the mother tongue as the cornerstone of cultural identity and national recognition. Emphasising its pedagogical value, he advocated for the effective use of the mother tongue as a powerful medium of instruction to ensure deeper understanding and inclusive education. He further stressed the need for collective unity and cooperation to accord the Kashmiri language its rightful place in society.

Among the other prominent speakers were Prof.



Mushtaq Ahmad Rather former Principal GDC Sopore--- former lecturer Mr. Mushtaq Ahmad Bhat, and Ms. Mehboob-un-Nisa

(Master). The speakers expressed concern over the declining status of the Kashmiri language in Jammu and Kashmir and called

upon all stakeholders to take immediate and concrete measures to revitalise and institutionalise it as a defining language of the

region. They also highlighted the urgent need to sensitise younger generations to the essence, richness, and legacy of their mother tongue. The proceedings of the programme were conducted with grace and efficiency by Mr. Muhammad Ashraf, Senior Lecturer, who ensured the smooth flow of the event.

The celebration concluded with a renewed pledge to safeguard linguistic diversity and to promote Kashmiri as a vibrant symbol of cultural pride and collective identity.

### Avail benefits under Mission YUVA: AD DECC Ganderbal

■ HT NEWS NETWORK

**SAFAPORA, FEB 21:** The Employment Department, District Ganderbal, today organized a vibrant Potential Entrepreneurship Mela at Higher Secondary School Safapora under the ambitious Mission YUVA initiative, witnessing an overwhelming and enthusiastic response from aspiring youth and stakeholders.

The programme aimed at fostering entrepreneurial spirit among young aspirants by providing them with guidance on self-employment schemes, start-up opportunities, financial linkages, and skill-based ventures. Participants were sensitized about various government-sponsored schemes and the support mechanisms available to transform innovative ideas



into sustainable enterprises.

Speaking to the media, Assistant Director Employment, Ganderbal, Miss Bensih Wani stated that the department successfully organized the Potential Entrepreneurship Mela with a strong turnout of youth. He expressed satisfaction over the encouraging response and reiterated the department's commitment to empowering young minds through awareness, mentorship, and structured support under Mission YUVA.

The Mela served as a significant platform for interaction between officials, financial institutions, and aspiring entrepreneurs, reinforcing the government's resolve to generate employment avenues and promote self-reliance among the youth of Ganderbal.

The whole event was actively hosted by Motivational Speaker Mr Bilal Bhat who is also Mission YUVA Motivator at District Ganderbal.

### SBI Kupwara Branch Constructs Fully Equipped Bathroom for Girl Students Under CSR

■ HT NEWS NETWORK

**KUPWARA, FEB 21:** In a laudable initiative under its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programme, State Bank of India (SBI), Branch Kupwara has constructed a fully equipped bathroom facility exclusively for girl students at Government Upper Primary School Gundkamal, Zone Langate.

The school has more than 100 girl students enrolled,



and the absence of a proper sanitation facility had been a major concern for a long time. Keeping in view the needs of adolescent girls, SBI has ensured that the newly constructed bathroom is provided with all modern facilities, including a geyser for hot water, water taps, water storage tank, and other essential fittings to maintain hygiene and comfort.

The initiative will go a long way in ensuring privacy, safety, and dignity for girl students and is expected to have a positive impact on their attendance and overall well-being. The school administration, parents, and local community have highly appreciated this best initiative by State Bank of India, expressing gratitude for addressing a critical infrastructural need.

This CSR effort once again reflects SBI's strong commitment towards girls' education, health, and community development.

# DC Budgam reviews “Jal Shakti Abhiyan: Catch the Rain-2025”, “Jal Sanchay Jan Bhagidari 2.0”

Focus on convergence, scientific planning & community participation

■ HT NEWS NETWORK

**BUDGAM, FEBRUARY 21:** Deputy Commissioner (DC) Budgam Dr. Bilal Mohi-Ud-Din Bhat, today chaired a comprehensive review meeting on the implementation and progress of Jal Shakti Abhiyan: Catch the Rain 2025 and Jal Sanchay Jan Bhagidari (JSJB) 2.0.

At the outset, a detailed presentation was given outlining the background, objectives, themes, and focused interventions under the ongoing campaign. The meeting deliberated on the theme for 2025 “Jal Sanchay Jan Bhagidari: Jan Jagrukta Ki Or Conservation towards Intensified Community Connect Campaign” with special focus on strengthening water security through community participation and convergence of departmental efforts.

The DC took a comprehensive review of works uploaded on the Jal Shakti Abhiyan portal and was informed that 61 works under JSJB 2.0 have been completed and uploaded till 15-02-2026. These include water conservation structures, recharge works, check dams, afforestation measures, catchment protection activities, and rejuvenation of traditional



water bodies across various blocks of the district including Khag, Khan-Sahib, Surasyar, Pakherpora, Sukhnag and Beerwah.

The meeting highlighted the special initiative under JSA-CTR

2025 ‘Jal-Jungle-Jan: Ek Prakritik

Bandhan Abhiyan’, focusing on mapping of forest springs, protection of catchment areas, and forest community engagement in river basins including the Jhelum

basin.

The DC directed all line departments including Forest, Jal Shakti, Rural Development & Panchayat Raj, Agriculture, I&FC, School Education, Social Welfare,

and Housing & Urban Development to ensure adherence to timeline, proper geo-tagging of all assets, convergent financing and optimal utilization of funds, prioritisation of water conservation works under MGNREGA as per notified percentage norms, saturation of rooftop rainwater harvesting structures in schools and Anganwadi centres.

The DC directed for intensified afforestation in catchment areas. He stressed on awareness on generation through Gram Sabhas and youth engagement. He emphasized that water conservation must become a mass movement and stressed upon strengthening the functioning of the Jal Shakti Kendra established in the district to act as a nodal coordination centre.

The DC directed all the concerned department to work in a coordinated and mission-mode manner to make Budgam a model district in water conservation and sustainable resource management.

Besides, SE Hydraulics Circle Budgam, GM DIC Budgam, CPO Budgam, SDM Beerwah, CHO, executive engineers of Jal Shakti department, all BDOs and other concerned officials were present in the meeting.

## DDC Chairperson Kulgam distributes Footballs among Schools under F4S initiative

■ HT NEWS NETWORK

**KULGAM, FEBRUARY 21:** Under Football for Schools (F4S) initiative, JNV schools Kulgam carried out football distribution Programme here at Mini-Secretariat which was presided by District Development Council Chairperson, Kulgam, Mohammad Afzal Parry and distributed 383 footballs among 81 schools of the district under the nationwide initiative aimed at promoting football at the grassroots level.

Additional District Development Commissioner (ADDC) Kulgam, Mohd Altaf; Chief Education Officer (CEO) Kulgam, Ab Gani Bhat; Deputy Chief Education Officer Kulgam; Principal, Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya Kulgam other staff members and students of JNV Kulgam participated in programme.



Heads of institutions and representatives from the designated schools attended the event and received the footballs for their respective institutions.

During his address, the DDC Chairperson highlighted the importance of sports in the overall development of students, stating that games and physical activities not only build physical fitness but also instill discipline, teamwork, leadership qualities, and confidence among young learners. He also emphasized the vital role of teachers in shaping the future of students, noting that educators act as mentors and guides who inspire students to excel both academically and in sports.

Students of JNV Kulgam also spoke on the occasion and highlighted the importance of sports in maintaining a healthy lifestyle, reducing stress, and promoting unity and team spirit among students.

## Entrepreneurship Mela under Mission YUVA organised at Tral

■ HT NEWS NETWORK

**PULWAMA, FEBRUARY 21:** District Administration Pulwama today organised a Potential Entrepreneurship Mela under Mission YUVA at Tral.

The mela aimed to promote entrepreneurship, facilitate on-boarding under Mission YUVA, provide market linkages and showcase successful enterprises, particularly women-led ventures.



The mela was inaugurated by Additional Deputy Commissioner (ADC) Tral, Sajad Yehaya Naqash, and witnessed enthusiastic participation from local youth, entrepreneurs, Self-Help Groups and members of the public. On the occasion, various departments including Industries, KVIB, Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, Sheep Husbandry, Horticulture, Handicrafts & Handloom and NRLM set up stalls to disseminate information regarding different welfare and livelihood schemes, providing on-the-spot guidance and awareness to participants. A dedicated Help Desk/Grievance Redressal Desk was also established by the District Employment and Counselling Centre, Pulwama to facilitate onboarding, provide assistance and address grievances related to Mission YUVA.

During the mela, the ADC distributed sanction letters among beneficiaries under Mission YUVA. Addressing the gathering, he urged the youth to take full advantage of government schemes and transform their innovative ideas into sustainable enterprises. He reiterated that Mission YUVA serves as a transformative platform for nurturing entrepreneurial talent and strengthening the local economy.

## H&H department organises capacity building program at Kulgam

■ HT NEWS NETWORK

**KULGAM, FEBRUARY 21:** A one day capacity building program on Design, Packaging and Branding for Artisans, weavers and other producer groups engaged in GI/ODOP/DEH products of Kashmir division was organised today at Conference Hall Mini Secretariat Kulgam under RAMP (Raising & Accelerating MSME Performance) Scheme by Handicrafts and Handloom (H&H) department Kulgam. The program witnessed enthusiastic participation of more than



100 Artisans/Weavers and other producer groups from across the Kulgam

district. Experts in design and marketing from JKEDI Kulgam delivered detailed presentations on the importance of product value addition through improved eco-friendly packaging, labelling standards and Brand Creation.

Participants were sensitized about the role of social media platforms, e-commerce opportunities in promoting traditional Kashmiri Crafts.

Interactive session was held wherein the participants shared their experience, challenges and suggestions about marketing and packaging of products.

## Entrepreneurship Mela held at Dooru

■ HT NEWS NETWORK

**ANANTNAG, FEBRUARY 21:** To mobilise the aspiring entrepreneurs and enhance grassroots awareness of the flagship initiative Mission YUVA, a day long Potential Entrepreneurship Mela was held today at GMHSS, Dooru.

Organised by the Employment Department in collaboration with the District Administration, the event witnessed active participation of aspiring entrepreneurs, Self-Help Group (SHG) members, unemployed youth, and representatives of various line departments.

Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM) Dooru, Parvez Rahim, who was the chief guest of the event inaugurated the program. He inspected the departmental stalls and interacted with participants, highlighting the objectives and benefits of the Mela.

SDM emphasized that such initiatives aim to bridge the gap between unemployed youth and self-employment agencies, adding that Mission YUVA seeks to promote entrepreneurship and sustainable livelihood generation at the grassroots level.

The event was hosted by the Career Counselling Officer, who outlined the key features of the programme including



registration, mentorship support, financial linkages, and departmental convergence under one platform.

Assistant Director Handloom and the Employment Officer briefed the participants about SHG-related schemes, financial assistance, skill development programmes, and employment generation opportunities. Various departments established facilitation counters to provide on-the-spot counselling and registration support.

## District Admin Bandipora organises Potential Entrepreneurship Mela under Mission YUVA at Mantrigam

■ HT NEWS NETWORK

**BANDIPORA, FEBRUARY 21:** District Administration Bandipora on Saturday organized a one-day Potential Entrepreneurship Mela under Mission YUVA at Government Higher Secondary School Mantrigam in Block Bonkoot.

Additional Deputy Commissioner Bandipora, Zaffar Husson Shawl, presided over the event and highlighted the importance of entrepreneurship in generating sustainable livelihood opportunities for the youth. He emphasized that Mission YUVA aims to mobilize potential entrepreneurs, disseminate information about various self-employment schemes, and provide necessary handholding support including financial and institutional guidance.

During the mela, various departments including DIC, Handicrafts and Handloom, Agriculture, Animal and Sheep Husbandry, NRLM, DE&CC, J&K Bank and RSETI set up stalls to showcase schemes and provide on-the-spot guidance to aspiring entrepreneurs. Help desks and advisory



counters were established to facilitate interactions regarding credit facilities, training programmes, and institutional support. Successful entrepreneurs and members of Self Help Groups (SHGs) also participated in the event and shared their experiences, motivating aspiring youth to explore entrepreneurship as a viable career option.

The programme witnessed active participation from local youth, women entrepreneurs, officials, and other stakeholders. The District Administration reiterated its commitment to promoting entrepreneurship through effective convergence, outreach, and coordinated efforts under Mission YUVA to ensure inclusive growth and employment generation across the district.

## SWD Srinagar organizes sensitization programme on “Bal Vivah Mukht Bharat”

■ HT NEWS NETWORK

**SRINAGAR, FEBRUARY 21:** Social Welfare Department (SWD) Srinagar, through SANKALP-Hub for Empowerment of Women (Mission Shakti), organized a comprehensive sensitization programme on “Bal Vivah Mukht Bharat” at Hamidi Kashmiri Memorial Government Degree College with the aim of fostering awareness, responsibility, and collective action against child marriage.

The programme was designed to educate students about the social, legal, psychological, and health-related consequences of child marriage while reinforcing the importance of continued

education, gender equality, and informed decision-making. It sought to empower young minds to recognize their rights and responsibilities and to actively contribute towards building a just and equitable society.

The event witnessed enthusiastic participation from students, faculty members, and distinguished guests, reflecting the strong commitment of the academic community towards social reform. A keynote address was delivered by a representative from the District Legal Services Authority Srinagar, who elaborated on the legal safeguards available under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006. The speaker emphasized the legal age of marriage,

penalties for violations, and the role of youth in reporting and preventing such practices within their communities.

Interactive sessions formed a key highlight of the programme. Students actively engaged in discussions, shared perspectives, and participated in poster presentations and speeches that creatively conveyed powerful messages against child marriage. The vibrant exchange of ideas not only enhanced understanding but also encouraged critical thinking and social responsibility among participants.

Addressing the gathering, officials from SANKALP-Hub underscored that education is the strongest

weapon to eradicate deep-rooted social evils such as child marriage. They reiterated that sustainable change begins with awareness and collective action, stating that youth play a vital role in transforming society.

The programme concluded with a collective pledge by students to spread awareness, uphold gender equality, and support initiatives aimed at making India free from child marriage. The initiative reflects the continued commitment of the Department of Social Welfare, Srinagar, towards empowering women and safeguarding the rights and dignity of children through sustained community engagement and awareness campaigns.

## DC Baramulla finalizes preparations for Khelo India Winter Games 2026

■ HT NEWS NETWORK

**GULMARG, FEBRUARY 21:** Deputy Commissioner (DC) Baramulla, Minga Sherpa, today conducted a comprehensive inspection of various venues and key locations at Gulmarg and finalized arrangements for the 6th edition of the Khelo India Winter Games.

Officers from sports, tourism, health, police, civil administration, and other line departments accompanied the DC during the inspection.

During the visit, the DC inspected the Gulmarg Golf Club and other designated competition and accommodation sites to ensure that all necessary arrangements have been put in place for the smooth and

successful conduct of the prestigious winter sporting event starting from 23rd February.

Minga Sherpa reviewed venue preparedness, lodging facilities for athletes and officials, transportation plans, medical facilities, emergency response mechanisms, sanitation, power and water supply, and security arrangements.

Earlier, the DC chaired a comprehensive meeting of officers from the concerned departments at Golf Club Gulmarg to review the status of preparations for ensuring a seamless experience for participants and visitors. The DC directed all departments to remain alert, ensure prompt response to any requirement, and maintain high standards of hospitality and professionalism throughout the event. UNI

# DC Kathua rolls out action plan to mark International Women's Day

Week-long celebrations to commence from March 02

## HT NEWS NETWORK

**KATHUA, FEBRUARY 21:** Deputy Commissioner Kathua, Rajesh Sharma chaired a meeting to roll out a comprehensive action plan for the celebration of Women Week across the district from March 2 to March 8, 2026 to mark International Women's Day.

The meeting was attended by ADDC, Surinder Mohan Sharma, CPO, Ranjeet Thakur, PO ICDS, Mohammed Syed, ACD, Akhil Sadotra, DSWO, Varun Chaudhary and other district and sectoral officers. Besides, ADCs and SDMs joined the meeting virtually.

During the meeting, a structured and result-oriented framework of activities was deliberated and finalised to ensure meaningful and impactful observance of the week. The action plan envisages active participation of all line departments, educational institutions and civil society organisations to promote women's empowerment and gender equality at the grassroots level.

As per the schedule, the week-long celebrations will include cultural performances showcasing the achievements and contributions



of women, dedicated sports activities such as Walkathon and Marathon to encourage fitness and

participation, legal and safety awareness programmes, cyber security awareness sessions, free medical camps, motivational lectures and felicitation of women achievers from various fields.

Special emphasis will be laid on activities under the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao initiative, with awareness drives, interactive sessions in schools and colleges and outreach programmes to reinforce the importance of girl child education and protection.

The DC stressed the need for coordinated and sustained efforts to ensure that the celebrations go beyond symbolic observance and translate into tangible outcomes. He directed all departments and field functionaries to ensure effective convergence of schemes, extensive outreach in rural and urban areas and maximum community participation.

The DC called for a multi-pronged approach and seamless coordination among departments for successful conduct of the week-long programme. The meeting concluded with directions to finalise the detailed calendar of events and ensure wide publicity across the district.

## ADDC reviews progress of ongoing works under RDD Sector in Udhampur

### HT NEWS NETWORK

**UDHAMPUR, FEBRUARY 21:** Additional District Development Commissioner, Udhampur, Jugal Kishore today chaired a review meeting to assess the Panchayat-wise progress of PMAY, KYC verification and other ongoing developmental works being executed under the Rural Development Department in the district.

At the outset, Assistant Commissioner Development, Om Parkash, presented a detailed PowerPoint presentation highlighting the physical and financial progress achieved under PMAY, KYC and other flagship schemes and developmental projects being implemented across the district under the RDD sector.



During the meeting, the BDOs were directed to ensure timely completion of all ongoing works within the stipulated deadlines. He instructed them to expedite the pace of execution and strictly adhere to the timelines fixed by the government for achieving the set targets.

ADDC further instructed field functionaries to remain present in their respective areas of posting, maintain close coordination with the public and ensure regular updating of tour diaries for effective supervision and accountability.

Reiterating the importance of transparency and responsibility, the ADDC exhorted officers and field functionaries to maintain the highest standards of accountability in the execution of works under the RDD sector. He impressed upon them to work with renewed zeal and dedication to accomplish the targets set for the current financial year.

Emphasising the need for strict monitoring, the ADDC called for close supervision of all ongoing works to ensure quality standards and adherence to prescribed timelines.

## MC Frisal Strengthens Sanitation Outreach under Swachh Survekshan 2025-26

### HT NEWS NETWORK

**KULGAM, FEBRUARY 21:** As part of the ongoing field preparedness for Swachh Survekshan 2025-26, the Municipal Committee (MC) Frisal, falling under the jurisdiction of Kulgam Municipal Council, today carried out an extensive Community Awareness Programme.

The initiative, held in collaboration with the IEC Team, was designed to eliminate open defecation and urination while promoting a permanent shift in public hygiene habits under the Swachh Bharat Mission Urban 2.0.

The outreach effort involved a series of structured community meetings and door-to-door visits aimed at reaching every household and business in the town. A significant focus was placed on commercial establishments and religious sites, where the IEC Team engaged directly with traders and Masjid Imams. These religious and community leaders played a vital role in the drive, helping to sensitize the public on the importance of maintaining the sanctity and cleanliness of places of worship and marketplaces alike.

By involving diverse stakeholders, including residents and local shopkeepers, the Municipal Committee Frisal is working to ensure that the town's ODF (Open Defecation Free) status is sustained through collective action. The program highlighted the critical link between responsible public behaviour and the overall health of the community. The intensive mobilization is a key component of the current monthly action plan, focused on closing service gaps and ensuring that sanitation infrastructure is utilized effectively.

Through these efforts, the Municipal Committee Frisal and the Kulgam Municipal Council remain committed to delivering a clean, healthy, and dignified environment for all residents ahead of the national assessment.

## Market checking drives intensified across Kupwara during Holy Month of Ramadhan

### HT NEWS NETWORK

**KUPWARA, FEBRUARY 21:** In view of the ongoing holy month of Ramadhan, on the directions of Deputy Commissioner Kupwara, extensive market checking drives were conducted across various tehsils of district Kupwara.

These drives aimed to ensure strict monitoring of prices and quality of essential commodities.

In Kupwara town, Tehsildar Kupwara, Niyaz Ahmad Bhat, led a comprehensive inspection team comprising officials from the Food Safety Department, Police, and Municipality. The team thoroughly

checked multiple shops and establishments for displayed rate lists, adherence to prescribed prices, quality standards, and regulatory compliance.

During inspection, expired stock of vegetable oil was seized and destroyed on the spot to protect public health. A fine of 3,000 was also imposed on violators.

## External Assessment conducted at District Hospital Kishtwar, SDH Atholi (Padder) under Kayakalp Programme

### HT NEWS NETWORK

**KISHTWAR, FEBRUARY 21:** Under the directions of Mission Director NHM J&K, Baseer ul Haq Choudhary and the guidance of Director Health Services Jammu, Dr. Abdul Hamid Zargar, a three-member team of assessors visited District Hospital Kishtwar and SDH Atholi (Padder) to conduct the External Assessment under the Kayakalp Programme for the financial year 2025-26.

The team was headed by Dr. Arun Sharma (External Assessor) and comprised Jahangir Mehta and Faizan A. Tramboos as Internal Assessors. The team carried out a comprehensive evaluation of various sections of the hospitals as per Kayakalp guidelines, focusing on sanitation, hygiene, infection control practices, waste management and overall quality of healthcare services.

At District Hospital Kishtwar, the Medical Superintendent, Dr. Yudhvir Singh Kotwal was present on the occasion. He welcomed and facilitated the visiting team and briefed them about the functioning of the hospital



and the range of healthcare services being provided to patients.

The team also visited SDH Atholi (Padder) where BMO Padder, Dr. Krishan Singh Katoch welcomed the assessors and apprised them of the services and overall functioning of the hospital. During the visits, the assessors inspected various departments, reviewed records and interacted with staff members to assess compliance with the prescribed standards under the Kayakalp initiative.

The assessment aims to promote cleanliness, strengthen infection control practices and encourage healthy competition among public health facilities to improve the overall patient care environment.

## Deputy Commissioner reviews functioning of District Hospital Poonch

### HT NEWS NETWORK

**POONCH, FEBRUARY 21:** District Development Commissioner (DDC) Poonch, Ashok Kumar Sharma conducted a comprehensive review of the functioning of District Hospital Poonch to assess healthcare services and ensure better patient care in the district. The review meeting was attended by Assistant Commissioner Revenue, Muhammad Sayed, Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Parvaiz Ahmed Khan, Medical superintendent District Hospital, Dr. Mohd Shafeeq, Deputy Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Ruby Naz Bhatti, District Immunization Officer, Dr. Zohra, consultant doctors, medical officers, in-charge of wards and operation theatre (OT) along with officials from various hospital sections.

The DDC directed the health authorities to ensure patient-friendly services in the hospital and emphasized on providing treatment with zero out-of-pocket expenditure for patients. He stressed that patients' rights must be given top priority and healthcare services should remain accessible and affordable for all.



He also instructed the CMO to organise a special cataract surgery camp in the district to facilitate treatment for patients suffering from eye-related ailments.

The DDC further directed hospital authorities to focus on increasing normal deliveries, maintain round-the-clock cleanliness across the hospital premises and strengthen overall healthcare infrastructure and services.

Various hospital sections, ongoing healthcare schemes and service delivery mechanisms were discussed in detail during the meeting, with officials asked to ensure efficient implementation of government health initiatives.

## CCF Jammu tours Nowshera Forest Division

### HT NEWS NETWORK

**NOWSHERA, FEBRUARY 21:** A tour programme was conducted today by the Jammu and Kashmir Forest Department in Nowshera Forest Division under the leadership of the Chief Conservator of Forests, Jammu, Dr. V. S. Senthil Kumar. He was accompanied by the Conservator of Forests, West Circle, Rajouri, Sat Paul.

The visit was undertaken in connection with the Khair Awareness and assessment Programme for formulation of the next ten-year Khair Management Plan with the proposed felling cycle from 2027-28 to 2036-37.

In Nowshera Forest Division, the Chief Conservator of Forests visited Sunderbani Range along with the Divisional Forest Officer, Nowshera, Shweta Deonia, DCF accompanied with field functionaries and staff of the department.

An interactive session was held with local farmers of 35 Villages and other stakeholders like Ex-PRI Members,



prominent villagers regarding the forthcoming ten-year Khair Management Plan wherein farmers are at the centre stage for Khair trees assessment in their private land holdings and the data proposed by them will be used for formulation of Khair Management Plan to be implemented

from 2027-28 to 2036-37.

ADC Sunderbani, Ramkesh Sharma along with other revenue officers/officials was also present on the occasion. The field staff distributed Khair Assessment Forms among the farmers to facilitate systematic data collection and ensure participatory planning.

On the occasion, Dr. V. S. Senthil planted a sapling in Nagar Van Charnote, symbolizing the department's commitment towards environmental conservation and promotion of indigenous species. The Chief Conservator of Forests emphasized the importance of scientific assessment, transparency in management practices and active community participation to ensure sustainable management of Khair resources and long-term ecological balance.

The programme concluded with directions to the field functionaries for timely completion of the assessment process and effective coordination with local stakeholders.

## DIC Kathua organises awareness cum outreach programme under RAMP

### HT NEWS NETWORK

**KATHUA, FEBRUARY 21:** Under the ongoing Raising and Accelerating MSME Performance (RAMP) Programme for the year 2025-26, the District Industries Centre (DIC) Kathua organised an Awareness-cum-Facilitation Camp at Industrial Estate Ghatti Kathua. The programme focused on promotion of on-the-spot facilitation of Udyam Registration for MSME units, traders and aspiring entrepreneurs to enhance formalisation and access to government support mechanisms.

The camp was held under the supervision of General Manager, DIC Kathua, Mushtaq Ahmed Chowdhary. It was coordinated by Functional Managers, Pallavi Bhardwaj and Sumit Gupta along with departmental officials including Narayan Singh, Devinder Verma and other staff members. The programme witnessed



enthusiastic participation from industrial unit holders, traders and MSME stakeholders operating in and around Industrial Estate Ghatti. Participants were sensitised about the significance, procedures and benefits of Udyam Registration under the RAMP framework, including access to government incentives, credit facilitation, policy support and formal recognition within the MSME ecosystem. Detailed awareness sessions were conducted to apprise stakeholders

of procedural requirements and advantages of enterprise formalisation. On-the-spot registration assistance and handholding support were also extended to facilitate immediate enrolment and address the queries of participants. The initiative aimed at strengthening MSME formalisation, improving ease of doing business and promoting entrepreneurship in the industrial landscape of Kathua district.

The programme concluded with positive feedback from stakeholders.

**HT EDITORIAL**

**Release pending salary of drivers, conductors of smart city buses immediately**

Nobody can deny the fact that the Srinagar Smart City bus service has revolutionized the public transport system not only in the Srinagar city but in other districts like Budgam, Ganderbal and Pulwama. These red coloured buses ferry thousands of commuters on a daily basis and ever since its inception people have heaved a sigh of relief. The introduction of this mode of transport has added a new dimension to the public transport system of Srinagar and other districts.

Despite the bus service being a hit a major roadblock has come in its way and the same is likely to derail the whole process. Over the past three months or so the drivers and conductors of the smart city buses are without salaries. The non-disbursal of salaries has led to problems for the drivers and conductors. It is getting difficult for these people to carry out the daily chores of life and despite running from pillar to post there is no relief in sight for them.

It is important that the higher-ups of Srinagar Smart City Limited (SSCL) take the issue seriously and ensure that the pending salaries of the drivers and conductors are released without any further delay. These people come from a humble background and in most of these cases they are the sole bread earners of their respective families. In such a case it gets difficult for these people to manage the daily expenses especially at a time when the prices of essential items are touching the sky.

Both the drivers and conductors of smart city buses usually start early in the morning and call it a day in the late hours of the day. Given this situation these people need to be given salary on time and there should not be any delay in this regard. Any delay in disbursal of salary means that we are pushing these people along with their families to the wall. This needs to be avoided so as to make this service more meaningful with more people getting benefitted.

If there is a further delay in disbursal of salaries of drivers and conductors there are maximum chances that most of them would give up their jobs and take up laborious jobs. In such a scenario the SSCL would be deprived of a professional work force. The company should take immediate steps for the release of salary of the drivers and conductors so that they are absolved of further mental agony.

**The price of speed: The future of youth is being extinguished on the roads**



■ DR. PRIYANKA SAURABH

Road accidents aren't just accidents, they're the result of our carelessness and irresponsible thinking. Speeding, drunk driving, and mobile phone use are devouring the lives of young people. Following the rules isn't a compulsion, but rather the foundation of life safety. We need to make road safety a habit and a culture. A little caution, patience, and responsibility can save many families from ruin. The future of young people is only possible with safe roads.

The constant deaths of young people in road accidents in India have become a reality that cannot be ignored. Every day, newspaper pages and news channel headlines remind us how unsafe roads are becoming. The worst affected in these accidents are the youth—the very group considered the future of the country. This situation is not only tragic but also a profound warning to society as a whole.

Road accidents are not random events; they are often the result of human negligence and irresponsible behavior. Speeding, ignoring traffic rules, driving in the wrong direction, driving while drowsy or fatigued, driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, and using a mobile phone while driving—all these factors combine to make the road a death trap. Worryingly, most of these accidents are entirely preventable with a little caution and understanding.

Youth is filled with enthusiasm, confidence, and a willingness to take risks. These qualities, when combined with discipline and responsibility, pave the way for progress. However, when this enthusiasm turns into recklessness, it leads to destruction. Today, many young people consider speed to be a matter of pride and breaking rules to be a matter of courage. Thinking "nothing will happen" or "I'll handle it" leads them to make risky decisions. Unfortunately, one small mistake can end a lifetime.

Modern lifestyles and technology have further complicated this problem. Mobile phones have become an integral part of life, but using them while driving is proving fatal. A moment of inattention, trying to read a message or answer a call, can cost many lives. Despite this, people don't take this danger seriously. This indifference is a major cause of the increasing number of road accidents.

Drunk driving is also a major cause of road accidents in India. Many people consider it normal, not a crime. Confidence in driving after a party with friends, or the thought, "What difference will a little alcohol make?", often proves fatal. Intoxicated



people reduce reaction time and impair decision-making, increasing the risk of accidents exponentially.

Additionally, drowsiness and fatigue are a serious but often overlooked factor. Long-distance travel, night driving, or driving after a long day of work can be taxing on the body and mind. Many accidents occur simply because a driver takes a nap, even for a few seconds. These few seconds can cost someone their entire life.

The government and administration have made numerous efforts to improve road safety. Traffic rules have been enacted, fines have been increased, helmets and seat belts have been made mandatory, and awareness campaigns are underway. But the truth is that laws are only effective when people wholeheartedly accept them. Simply following rules out of fear is not enough; a change in thinking and behavior is essential.

It's a grave mistake to consider road safety solely the responsibility of the administration. It's a shared responsibility of every citizen. As drivers, our carelessness not only endangers our lives but also the lives of others on the road. Pedestrians, cyclists, the elderly, children—all can become victims of our single mistake.

The role of the family and the education system is also crucial in this regard. Parents should ensure that children are properly educated on traffic rules and road safety before allowing them to drive. Simply teaching them how to drive is not enough; it's crucial to instill safe and responsible driving habits. Schools and colleges should also conduct regular road safety awareness programs to ensure that young people adopt these values from a young age.

The role of the media is no less important. Films

and advertisements often portray high-speed and risky driving as a form of adventure and bravery. This has a profound impact on young people. It is essential that entertainment media also convey responsible messages and promote safe behavior.

A shift in thinking is also needed at the societal level. We must understand that breaking rules is not cleverness, but irresponsibility. Those who drive drunk or without a helmet should be stopped and counseled, not praised. Unless there is social disapproval of recklessness, this problem will be difficult to overcome.

Today, road accident deaths are not just statistics. Behind every death lies the devastation of a family, the shattering of a parent's dream, and the loss of a promising force in society. Youth are the backbone of the nation. Their untimely demise is an irreparable loss not only to the family but also to the nation.

To address this serious situation, we need efforts at all three levels—individual, societal, and institutional. At the individual level, every driver must pledge to follow the rules and respect the safety of others. At the societal level, we must embrace safe driving as a rite of passage. And at the institutional level, we need effective law enforcement and constant awareness.

Ultimately, staying safe on the road isn't just about saving one's own life, but about humanity and responsibility. A little caution, patience, and discipline can save countless lives. If we don't act now, this tragedy could strike any home tomorrow. Young people's lives are precious—it's our responsibility to protect them from being lost to carelessness.

The author is a, PhD (Political Science), is a poet and social thinker

**Acute Electricity Crisis In twin Capital Cities of Jammu & Srinagar**

■ OMKAR DATTATRAY

Come Winter and Summer and in both the seasons the capital cities of Jammu as well as Srinagar are facing acute, intense and unprecedented electricity crisis. The public that is the electricity consumers in both the cities are best with the alarming electricity crises and the people are suffering for no fault of theirs. All talks and claims of the JKPDC and PDD of providing uninterrupted power supply to the consumers of at least Jammu and Srinagar are falling flat. In fact, it is not only Jammu and Srinagar cities alone which experience electricity woes but the whole of Jammu and Kashmir UT facing unprecedented electricity crisis and currently Jammu and Kashmir is reeling under electricity crises. The UT of Jammu and Kashmir is experiencing a severe, chronic, and worsening electricity crisis as of early 2026, with both Srinagar and Jammu facing frequent, long-duration power outage, particularly during peak winter months. Despite the region being a major producer of hydroelectricity, the demand far exceeds supply, leading to significant, sometimes 14-16-hour, daily power cuts in the valley and severe shortages in Jammu. Kashmir valley [Srinagar] is reeling under an "unprecedented" power crisis. In January 2026, heavy snowfall caused the power grid to collapse to less than 6% of its capacity, with active load plunging below 100MW against a demand of 100MW, breaking a prolonged dry spell. Even before snow, 5-6-hour, sometimes up to 16-hour outages were reported. Residents

of Jammu are facing 8-9-hour scheduled and unscheduled cuts, with rural areas hit harder. The situation is aggravated by high temperatures in summer and low supply, causing major disruptions to water supply and daily life. The crisis has paralysed daily life, hundred business operations affected. The UT of J&K including its capital cities Jammu and Srinagar, is currently grappling with a severe, recurring electricity crisis, characterised by significant power deficits, frequent and often unscheduled, power cuts during winter and summer seasons. Despite having vast hydropower potential, the region relies on heavy imports and suffers from aging infrastructure, leading to massive T&D losses and public dissatisfaction. It is unfortunate and disturbing that despite smart metering in both the cities and their municipal jurisdiction the power situation is going from bad to worse and the consumers are the biggest sufferers. Consumers, of both the cities honestly pay electricity bills but what they get from the authorities is hide and seek of the electricity and the public is becoming restive and they are becoming patience less. It is a sorry state of affairs that in winters both in Srinagar as well as in Jammu, the consumers are subjected to scheduled and unscheduled power cuts putting the public of both these cities to inconvenience and trouble. It is very sad and disturbing that at the peak hours and otherwise also the electricity remains conspicuously absent with the result that public is made to suffer despite the hallow and shallow assurances of the men at the helm of affairs that

with the smart metering, there will be improvement in the electricity supply and distribution and transmission but what we experience actually is the acute shortage of electricity which makes the people's lives difficult. All talk of uninterrupted electricity has vanished and has fell flat as the consumers despite paying hefty amounts as electricity freight are beset with the problem of electricity curtailments off and on with the result when the people need electricity most, there is unprecedented electricity crises troubling the honest consumers in both the cities of Jammu and Srinagar. PDD & JKPDC seems unconcerned and they are in great slumber and they do not take serious and concerted steps to augment the electricity supply in winters as well as summers and the result is that people suffer in both summer as well as winter in both the cities of Jammu and Srinagar. It is very unfortunate that PDD and JKPDC both are taking a lenient view and take the electricity crises casually with the result the public in both Jammu and Srinagar are facing hardships and inconveniences. The authorities and the power minister should awake from slumber and tackle the electricity crises on a war footing. People no longer should be subjected to frequent power curtailments both during the day and night as it compounds their difficulties and hardships. Now that there is smart metering in place in both Jammu and Srinagar and so the public should not be subjected to scheduled and unscheduled power cuts and that too at peak hours when people need electricity most. The author-

ties should leave inertia and see the problem from the angle of humanity and take earnest steps to improve the position of electricity and tide over the situation and provide uninterrupted electricity to consumers in both Jammu and Srinagar. One fails to understand when the consumers are paying electricity bills that also at the same time, why they are not provided uninterrupted power supply. Before it is too late the government should step in and tide over the situation and improve the electricity supply so that the consumers do not face inconvenience due to intense and acute electricity supply. The public is cursing themselves and their elected government and representatives and they lament that they are the citizens of Jammu and Kashmir, where it seems to be no concern of the authorities to improve the electricity position. The position of electricity is going from bad to worse with each passing day and the authorities seem to be helpless watchers and they are actually doing nothing to improve the power situation with the result the patience of the consumers is waning. Government should intervene and improve the power situation so that the consumers do not suffer for no fault of theirs. But the million dollar question is are the authorities at the helm of affairs listening and if they are listening, will they wake up from slumber and put in their efforts to improve the electricity situation so that the innocent and hapless public will not suffer any more?

The author is a columnist, social, KP activist & Freelancer

# AI in the School Classroom: Promise, Peril, and Pedagogy



■ DR. RATAN BHATTACHARJEE

Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the India AI Impact Summit 2026 at Bharat Mandapam in New Delhi, calling it a "historic" gathering that brought together the who's who of the global AI community. The five-day summit, held from February 16 to 20, features participation from world leaders, ministers, tech giants like Google, Microsoft, and Meta, as well as academics and policymakers. Modi emphasized India's role as a primary engine of the artificial intelligence revolution, presenting a roadmap for responsible and inclusive AI development. He also interacted with entrepreneurs and explored stalls showcasing indigenous innovations in healthcare, robotics, and telecommunications.

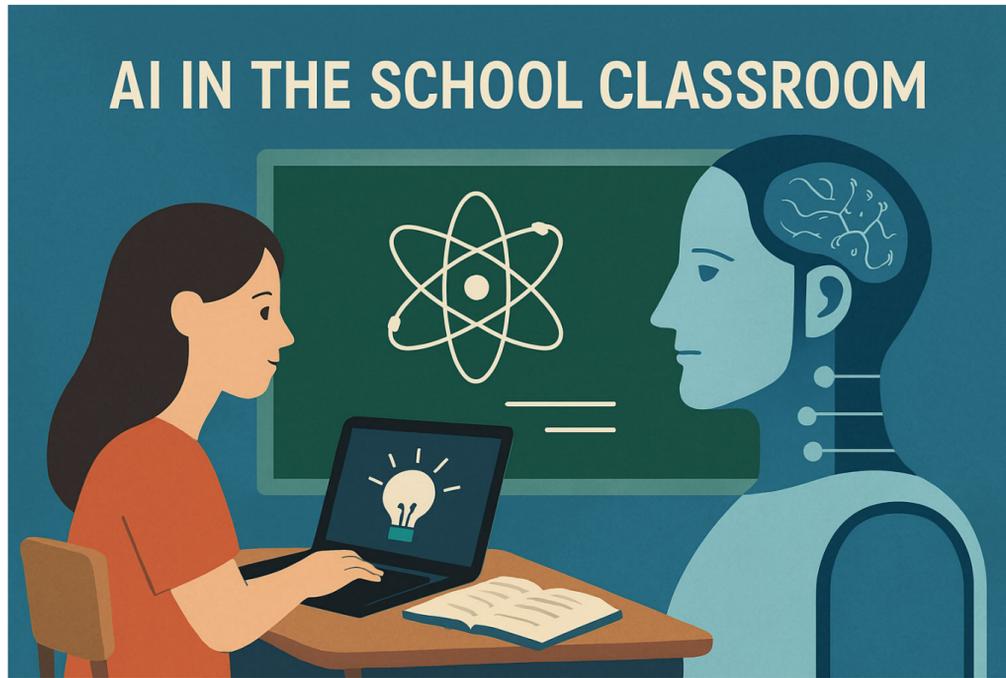
The summit's theme, Sarvajana Hitaya, Sarvajana Sukhaya ("for the welfare and happiness of all"), underscores India's commitment to ensuring AI benefits society broadly. Key sessions include the Leaders' Plenary, where global representatives are discussing AI governance, infrastructure, cooperation, and future priorities. Modi highlighted that India's progress in AI will not only shape transformative solutions domestically but also contribute to global advancement.

Artificial Intelligence has become one of the most transformative forces of our time, and its influence is increasingly visible in the school classroom. The idea of machines assisting in education was once confined to science fiction, but today AI is actively shaping how teachers teach and how students learn. The classroom, traditionally a space defined by chalkboards, textbooks, and human interaction, is now evolving into a hybrid environment where algorithms, adaptive platforms, and intelligent assistants play a central role. This transformation is not merely technological; it is pedagogical, ethical, and cultural, raising questions about the very nature of education in the twenty-first century.

The rise of AI in education has been rapid. In the United States, surveys show that thousands of teachers are already using generative AI platforms to design lesson plans, create quizzes, and even provide personalized tutoring. Students, particularly teenagers, have embraced AI tools for homework assistance, with studies suggesting that seven out of ten use them regularly. This adoption reflects both opportunity and risk. On one hand, AI offers unprecedented personalization, efficiency, and engagement. On the other, it raises concerns about dependency, bias, and the erosion of human empathy in teaching. The classroom is thus becoming a testing ground for how society negotiates the balance between technology and humanity.

Global examples illustrate the scale of this transformation. In February 2026, Delhi launched CMShri Schools, equipped with AI-enabled smart classrooms, language labs, and robotics kits. These schools feature interactive panels that display daily goals, AI-based quizzes tailored to individual student levels, and skill labs designed to make children globally competitive. Such initiatives demonstrate how governments are investing in AI infrastructure to modernize education, aligning with national policies and global aspirations. They also highlight the potential of AI to democratize access to quality education, though disparities remain stark between well-funded institutions and under-resourced schools.

The digital divide in education refers to the unequal access to digital technologies—especially internet connectivity, devices, and digital literacy—that affects students' ability to participate in modern learning environments. According to the OECD, this divide encompasses disparities in infrastructure, affordability, and skills, leading to unequal opportunities for accessing information and engaging in digital learning. In India, the divide is particularly stark. While urban schools may



boast smart classrooms and AI-enabled labs, many rural and underfunded schools lack basic internet access or even electricity. A white paper by the Centre for Civil Society outlines a governance roadmap to bridge this gap, emphasizing inclusive digital education through public-private partnerships, infrastructure investment, and teacher training.

The divide also manifests in students' home environments. Those from affluent families often have personal devices and high-speed internet, while others rely on shared phones or public Wi-Fi. This affects not only homework completion but also long-term digital fluency. Bridging the divide requires systemic change—affordable devices, universal broadband, and curriculum reform that includes digital skills as a core competency. AI integration in Kashmir's school classrooms is gaining momentum through initiatives like the Center for AI Kashmir (CAI), which aims to democratize artificial intelligence education across the region. CAI envisions transforming schools into hubs of innovation where students are not just passive users of technology but active creators. Their curriculum focuses on coding, ethical AI understanding, and real-world problem solving, preparing students for a digital-first future.

Organizations like NatureNurture are also working with schools in Kashmir to implement AI-driven learning environments that are both modern and rooted in child development. These efforts include teacher training, curriculum design, and smart learning platforms that align with how children learn today. However, challenges persist. Kashmir's education system has long grappled with political disruptions, frequent school closures, and intermittent internet shutdowns. Teachers often lack exposure to modern digital tools and training, making AI adoption uneven. Thoughtful implementation is key—AI can empower overburdened teachers through personalized development and blended learning, but only if infrastructure and support systems are in place.

One of the most celebrated contributions of AI is its ability to personalize learning. Traditional classrooms often struggle to cater to diverse learning speeds and styles, but AI systems can adapt content to individual needs. Adaptive quizzes adjust difficulty based on student responses, AI tutors provide instant feedback, and learning analytics identify struggling students early. This personalization promises to reduce achievement gaps and foster inclusivity. Yet, it also raises questions about over-reliance on algorithms. If students become accustomed to machine-guided learning, will they lose the ability to think critically and independently? Psychologists warn that while AI can enhance learning, it must be integrated thoughtfully to avoid undermining essential human skills.

Teachers, far from being replaced, are finding new roles in collaboration with AI. Many use AI to automate routine tasks

**The divide also manifests in students' home environments. Those from affluent families often have personal devices and high-speed internet, while others rely on shared phones or public Wi-Fi. This affects not only homework completion but also long-term digital fluency. Bridging the divide requires systemic change—affordable devices, universal broadband, and curriculum reform that includes digital skills as a core competency. AI integration in Kashmir's school classrooms is gaining momentum through initiatives like the Center for AI Kashmir (CAI), which aims to democratize artificial intelligence education across the region.**

such as grading, attendance tracking, or generating practice questions, freeing time for creative and interpersonal engagement. This symbiosis positions teachers as facilitators of human connection, while AI handles repetitive tasks. However, the balance is delicate. If schools lean too heavily on AI, the teacher's role risks being diminished, reducing education to a transactional process rather than a relational one. The essence of teaching lies not only in delivering information but in nurturing curiosity, empathy, and resilience—qualities that machines cannot replicate.

Ethical concerns loom large in the integration of AI. Algorithms trained on biased data may perpetuate stereotypes, disadvantaging marginalized students. Privacy is another pressing issue, as personalization requires collecting vast amounts of student data. Dependency is equally troubling; students may become overly reliant on AI tools, weakening their problem-solving abilities. Addressing these challenges requires transparent policies, teacher training, and student awareness programs. Psychologists emphasize the need for "smart adoption," ensuring that AI enhances rather than undermines learning. Ethical frameworks must guide the use of AI, balancing innovation with responsibility.

AI also has the potential to transform classroom dynamics. Teachers experimenting with generative AI often share AI-generated responses during class discussions, encouraging students to critique, compare, and refine them. This practice not only demystifies AI but also fosters critical engagement. Students learn to question machine outputs, sharpening their analytical skills. Moreover, AI-powered simulations and virtual reality environments can make abstract concepts tangible. Imagine a history class where students walk through ancient Rome, guided by an AI narrator, or a science lab where AI models chemical reactions in real time. Such immersive experiences can ignite curiosity and deepen understanding, making learning more engaging and memorable.

Yet, the promise of AI is tempered by the reality of the digital divide. Wealthier schools can afford advanced AI tools, while underfunded institutions struggle with basic infrastructure. This disparity threatens to exacerbate educational inequality. Initiatives like Delhi's CMShri Schools attempt to democratize access, but global disparities remain stark. Addressing this challenge requires policy interventions, public-private partnerships, and community-driven solutions to ensure that AI benefits all students,

not just the privileged. Equity must be at the heart of AI integration, lest technology become another barrier rather than a bridge.

Assessment is another area where AI is reshaping education. Traditional exams often fail to capture the full spectrum of student abilities, but AI offers alternatives. Continuous assessment tracks progress over time, providing a holistic view of learning. Skill-based evaluation assesses creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving through simulations and projects. Instant feedback enables iterative improvement, allowing students to learn from mistakes in real time. However, reliance on AI for assessment raises concerns about fairness, transparency, and accountability. Who audits the algorithms? How do we ensure that AI assessments align with human values? These questions underscore the need for oversight and ethical governance.

For AI to succeed in classrooms, teachers must be adequately trained. Professional development programs should cover understanding AI tools and their pedagogical applications, recognizing biases and ethical pitfalls, and balancing AI use with traditional teaching methods. Without such training, teachers risk either misusing AI or resisting it altogether. Empowering educators is therefore central to sustainable AI integration. Teachers must be equipped not only with technical skills but also with critical frameworks to evaluate AI's role in education.

Looking ahead, AI is likely to become even more embedded in classrooms. Emerging trends include emotion AI, systems that detect student emotions through facial recognition or voice analysis, adjusting teaching strategies accordingly. Collaborative AI tools may facilitate group projects, fostering teamwork and communication. Global classrooms, enabled by AI platforms, could connect students across borders, promoting cultural exchange and global citizenship. These innovations promise to redefine education, but they must be guided by ethical frameworks and human-centered values. The future of education will depend not only on technological advances but on the choices we make about how to use them.

Ultimately, AI in the classroom is neither a panacea nor a peril. It is a tool—powerful, versatile, and transformative—whose impact depends on how we use it. The challenge lies in striking a balance: leveraging AI's strengths while safeguarding human values. Teachers, policymakers, psychologists, and technologists must collaborate to ensure that AI enhances learning without eroding empathy, equity, or creativity. Education has always been about more than information transfer; it is about nurturing human potential. AI can assist in this mission, but it cannot replace the human heart of teaching. The classroom of the future must therefore be a space where technology and humanity coexist, enriching each other in the shared pursuit of knowledge.

The story of AI in the school classroom is still being written. It is a story of promise and peril, of innovation and caution, of machines and humans learning to coexist. As schools experiment with AI, they are not merely adopting new tools; they are redefining what it means to educate. The stakes are high, for the classroom is the crucible where future citizens are shaped. If AI is integrated wisely, it can help create a generation of learners who are not only technologically adept but also ethically grounded, critically minded, and deeply human. If misused, it risks reducing education to a mechanical process, stripping away the very qualities that make learning meaningful. The choice is ours, and it will determine not only the future of education but the future of society itself.

**Dickens Medal Awardee multilingual writer and poet Dr. Ratan Bhattacharjee is a former Affiliate Faculty Virginia Commonwealth University & Retd. Associate Professor and Head Post Graduate Dept of English Dum Dum Motijheel College and at present President Kolkata Indian American Society Email prof.ratanbhattacharjee@gmail.com**

# Health Benefits Of Dates



SAHIL MANZOOR BHATTI

Alhamdulillah! Ramadan starts on the 19th of this month. Muslims in all corners of the world are excited.

Dates are sweet, delicious, and nutritious fruits available throughout the year. They are often used in preparing different mixtures of dry fruits and other delicacies. Dates are primarily cultivated in Saudi Arabia from August to mid-November each year. Apart from Saudi Arabia, they are also grown in Egypt, Iran, the UAE, Pakistan, and several other countries.

During the holy month of Ramadan, the demand for dates rises sharply. Muslims across the world prefer to break their fast with a few dates, following the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). This practice is not only spiritually significant but also provides an instant source of natural energy after a day of fasting. In the market, various types of dates ranging from low-quality to premium varieties are available to meet the needs of customers.

Nutritional Value and Fibre Content Dates are loaded with vitamins, minerals, and fibre. The high fibre content helps cleanse the stomach and maintain a healthy digestive system. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, a single pitted date contains about 1.6 grams of fibre, which is roughly six percent of the daily recommended intake. Fibre plays a vital role in digestion it

**Instant Energy Booster**  
Quickly restores energy.

**Improves Digestion**  
Supports gut health.

**Heart Friendly**  
Regulates blood pressure.

**Strengthens Bones**  
Supports stronger bones.

**Boosts Immunity**  
Rich in antioxidants.

**Brain Health Support**  
Enhances cognitive function.

**Perfect for Ramadhan & Daily Diet**

- ✓ Eat 2-3 dates daily
- ✓ Ideal for Iftar & energy restoration.
- ✓ Suitable for all ages.

softens stool, prevents constipation, and reduces the risk of haemorrhoids. It also helps lower levels of "bad" cholesterol (LDL), combats obesity, and promotes a healthy colon, reducing the risk of colitis and colon cancer. A review published in Critical Reviews

in Food Science and Nutrition found that the insoluble fibre in dates binds to fat and cholesterol, helping remove them from the body.

**Heart Health**  
Eating dates is an excellent way to main-

tain a healthy heart. Dates are rich in potassium, which helps lower the risk of stroke and other cardiovascular diseases. Combined with their ability to reduce LDL cholesterol, dates become a heart-friendly superfood. For best results, some experts recommend soaking dates overnight and

eating them the next morning.

**Rich Source of Essential Minerals and Vitamins**

A study published in the International Journal of Food Sciences and Nutrition (2003) described dates as "an almost ideal food," providing a wide range of essential nutrients. Dates contain at least 15 minerals, several amino acids, and healthy fatty acids, making them beneficial for strengthening bones, preventing diseases like osteoporosis, and keeping the blood strong and healthy.

**Here are some key nutrients found in dates:**

**Potassium:** Maintains heart health, builds muscles, and regulates blood pressure.

**Copper:** Aids in the production of red blood cells, improves iron absorption, and prevents premature ageing.

**Magnesium:** Reduces inflammation, lowers blood pressure, and protects against arthritis and cardiovascular disease.

**Selenium:** Boosts immunity and acts as a powerful anti-cancer agent.

**Iron:** Essential for producing red blood cells and preventing anaemia.

**Vitamin B6:** Enhances brain performance and supports muscle function.

**Niacin (Vitamin B3):** Helps convert food into energy and supports nerve function.

**Vitamin A:** Keeps the eyes, skin, and mucous membranes healthy.

In conclusion, dates are not just a symbol of tradition and faith but also a nutrient-packed superfood that supports overall health. Whether eaten fresh, dried, or soaked, dates remain one of nature's most complete and beneficial gifts.

sahilmanzoor0401@gmail.com

## MS. JAASINDAH MIR

RCI-LICENSED PSYCHOLOGIST | EFT MASTER PRACTITIONER |  
FLOWER ESSENCE PRACTITIONER | AUTHOR

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🕒 8:00PM On January 18<sup>th</sup>, Sunday

## M S Nazki Receives DG Assam Rifles Commendation Medal at Delhi

■ HT NEWS NETWORK

**NEW DELHI, FEB 21:** The Director General of Assam Rifles, Lt General Vikas Lakhera, honored noted author and Special Defence Correspondent Mr. M S Nazki with the DG Assam Rifles Commendation Medal during Unity Utsav 2.0 held in Delhi. Mr. Nazki, a distinguished son of the soil, social worker, and philanthropist, was recognized for his significant contribution in fostering strong and constructive relations between the Assam Rifles and civil society across Northeast India. His sustained



efforts in highlighting the role of the force and promoting civil-military harmony have earned wide appreciation.

The people of Jammu & Kashmir and the Union Territory of Ladakh have expressed pride over the recognition and conveyed their gratitude to the Assam Rifles for acknowledging Mr. Nazki's dedicated service and commitment.

The award reflects the continued emphasis of the Assam Rifles on strengthening outreach, trust-building, and cooperation with communities across the region.

## Online Event Organised by Daera-e-Adab Delina Baramulla on International Mother Language Day

Speakers Highlight the  
Importance and Significance  
of the Mother Tongue

■ HT NEWS NETWORK

**SRINAGAR, FEB 21:** An impressive online event was organised by Daera-e-Adab Delina Baramulla in connection with International Mother Language Day. The programme brought together prominent literary, academic, and social personalities who highlighted the importance, value, and preservation of the mother tongue.

The speakers emphasised that a mother language is the true identity of a nation and the guardian of its culture and heritage. They stressed that merely observing one day in the name of the mother tongue is not sufficient; rather, consistent and year-round efforts are needed to preserve, promote, and pass it on to future generations.

The event began with a welcome address by the President of Daera-e-Adab Delina, Mohammad Afzal Afzal, who greeted the guests and briefly outlined the objectives of the organisation.

Distinguished participants included Prof. Mohammad



Zaman Azurdah, Prof. Shafi Shouq, Prof. Shad Ramzan, Fayaz Tilgami, Manshoor Banahali, Ghulam Nabi Haleem, Zameer Ansari, Shahbaz Hakbari, Shehnaz Rashid, Ali Shaida, Mushtaq Ali Ahmad Khan, Shahidah Shabnam, Rahim Rehbar, Shahid Dilnawi, Shakir Shafi, Mehtab Manzoor, and Shabir Hakak.

At the conclusion of the programme, Fayaz Tilgami presented a vote of thanks to all the guests and participants. The technical support for the event was provided by Sahil Dar, while Jameel Ansari conducted the proceedings.

The event concluded on a positive note, with participants reaffirming their commitment to the protection and promotion of their mother tongue.

## Public Notice

This is for information of general public that the (Electric bill ) power connection is registered on the name AB HAMID GANIE S/L AB REHMAN GANIE R/O BARAMPORA PATTAN Now this Connection bearing Consumer ID NO 0213040008740 wants to be registered on my correct name BADUL HAMEED GANAEI S/O HABIB GANAEI R/O BARAMPORA .If anybody have any objection in this regard He/She may file his/her objection in the concerned PDD office within seven days from the date of publication of this notice after that no objection will be entertained

**Name...ABDUL HAMEED GANAEI  
S/O ... HABIB GANAEI  
R/O ....BARAMPORA PATTAN**

Government Of Jammu & Kashmir

## Office Of The Tehsildar Kreeri

Subject: Application RASHID GANI MIR & MEHRAJ GANI MIR S/O ABDUL GANI MIR R/O KAKOTHAL for issuance of RBA certificate in favour of self for the issuance of RBA in his/her / their favor

## PUBLIC NOTICE

Regarding the subject cited above the file in the office of the undersigned for the issuance of RBA in this connection a report of patwari halqa concerned has been sought which reveals that the applicant is currently residing in the village of KAKOTHAL of Tehsil KREERI and belongs to the GANAI community having annual income 696560 // the details of family of the applicant are as follows

- 1..ABDUL GANI MIR Father 65 years Retire employee
- 2..TASLEEMA BEGUM Mother 55 years House wife
- 3....YASMEENA GANI sister 25 years student
- 4...RASHID GANI MIR Applicant 19 years student
- 5....MEHRAJ GANI MIR Applicant 19 years do

If anyone have any objection to the issuance of delay order of said certificate shall present his/her claim this office within 07 days, after that no objection shall be entertained.

**Naib Tehsild Kreeri**

Government Of Jammu & Kashmir

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- 3....YASMEENA GANI sister 25 years student
- 4...RASHID GANI MIR Applicant 19 years student
- 5....MEHRAJ GANI MIR Applicant 19 years do

If anyone have any objection to the issuance of delay order of said certificate shall present his/her claim this office within 07 days, after that no objection shall be entertained .

**Naib Tehsild Kreeri**

Government Of Jammu & Kashmir

## Office Of The Tehsildar Kreeri

Subject: Application SHIJA UL BASHIR HAJAM & KHALID BASHIR HAJAM S/O BASHIR AHMAD HAJAM R/O KREERI Tehsil KREERI for the issuance of OBC ( Other Backward classes in favor of applications

## PUBLIC NOTICE

Regarding the subject cited above the file in the office of the undersigned for the issuance of OBC in this connection a report of patwari halqa concerned has been sought which reveals that the applicant is currently residing in the village of KREERI of Tehsil KREERI and belongs to the HAJAM community having annual income 514848 // ( Five lack fourteen thousand eight hundred forty eight ) the details of family of the applicant are as follows

- 1...BASHIR AHMAD HAJAM Father 65 years Retired govt employee
- 2.SHAMEEMA BEGAM Mother 60 years Housewife
- 3... KHALID BASHIR applicant 32 years student
4. SOBIYA BINT MAJID w/o KHALID 32 years H/W
- 5...MOHAMMAD IBIN KHALID S/O KHALID 04 years infant
- 6...ABIHA KHALID D/O KHALID 02 years infant
- 7...SHIJA UL BASHIR applicant 30 years private job

If anyone have any objection to the issuance of delay order of said certificate shall present his/her claim this office within 07 days, after that no objection shall be entertained.

**Naib Tehsild Kreeri**

## Public Notice

My name has been wrongly written as RAFIQA BEGUM W/O ABDUL RASHID KOLAS in my Bank Account bearing account No ...0075040800000448 while my correct name is RAFEEQA BEGUM W/O BASHIR AHMAD POSWAL R/O ..BANDI BALA which needs to be corrected if anybody having any objection in this regard he/ she may file his/her objection in the office of J & K BANK , BRANCH CHANDUSA within seven days from the publication of this notice after that no objection will be entertained

**Name....RAFAEQA BEGUM.  
W/O ....BASHIR AHMAD POSWAL  
R/O....BANDI BALA  
DISTT....BARAMULLA**

Government Of Jammu & Kashmir

## Office Of The Tehsildar Kreeri

Subject: Application of FAHMEEDA BANO S/O BILAL AHMAD WANI R/O WARIPORA BALA for the issuance of Dependent certificate

## PUBLIC NOTICE

Regarding the subject cited above in this context a report sought from patwari halqa concerned .The report of patwari halqa concerned and the death certificate issued by competent Authority reveals that BILAL AHMAD WANI S/O AB AHAD WANI R/O WARIPORA Bala Tehsil kreeri has passed away on 04/12/2025

- Moreover family structure of the applicant is as under
- 1... FAHMEEDA BANO wife 38 years H/W widow
  - 2..ABRAR BILAL WANI son 15 years student unmarried
  - 3...MUZZAFAR BILAL son 09 years student minor
  - 4...KATIFA SHOWKAT daughter 08 years student. //

The applicant has applied for Issuance of Dependent certificate in favour of FAHMEEDA BANO if anyone have any objection to the issuance of delay order of said certificate shall present his/her claim this office within 07 days, after that no objection shall be entertained.

**Naib Tehsild Kreeri**

## Public Notice

My name has been wrongly written as KAMRAN S/O UMAR ASADULLAH GANAIE in my Date of Birth certificate while my correct name is AHMAD BIN UMAR S/O UMAR ASSADULLAH GANAIE which needs to be corrected if anybody having any objection in this regard he/she may file his/her objection in the office of concerned authorities within seven days from the publication of this notice after that no objection will be entertained.

**Name....AHMAD BIN UMAR  
S/O...UMAR ASSADULLA GANAIE  
R/O...SHRAKWARA WAGOORA**

## Public Notice

It is hereby informed to the general public that Late AB Rehman Reshi, R/o Khullchoher, Tehsil Shangas, District Anantnag, expired on 10/01/2026.

The following are his legal heirs:

- Khatija Begum – Wife
- Mohd Ashraf Reshi – Son
- Gulzar Ahmad Reshi – Son
- Reyaz Ahmad Reshi – Son
- Jameela Banoo – Daughter
- Atiqia Banoo – Daughter
- Sakeena Banoo – Daughter
- Hafeeza Banoo – Daughter
- Mehmooda Banoo – Daughter

If anyone has any objection regarding the legal heirship, he/ she may submit the same within 7 days from the date of publication. After that, no objection will be entertained.

**Sd/- Mohd Ashraf Reshi  
R/o Khullchoher, Shangas, Anantnag**

Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir,

## Office of the Executive Engineer R&B Division Kralpora

**Short Term E tendering NIT No 71/RnB/Kralpora of 2025-26 | Dated: 20-02-2026**

For & on behalf of the Lt. Governor Jammu & Kashmir (UT), e-tenders are being invited on Percentage basis from approved and eligible Contractors registered with the J&K UT Government, CPWD, Railways, and other State/Central Governments for the following works

S.N o	Name of Work	Adv. Cost (In Lacs)	Cost of T/Doc. (In Rupees)	Earnest Money Deposit	Time of completion	Date and time of opening	Class of Contractor	Major Head
1.	Upgradation of Link Road Main road to Degree College via Middle School at Dardsun A, Block Kralpora	1.48	200/-	2960	8 days	28-02-2026 (12:00 Noon)	Dee	MP-LADS
2.	Upgradation of Link Road from main Road to Woveri Mohallah Warsun B	2.41	200/-	4830	10 days		Dee	

Position of AAA/ TS: Accorded  
No: Div-KRLP/4769-83

Position of funds: Available  
Date: 20-02-2026

1. The bidding documents, which would include qualifying information, eligibility criteria, specifications/drawings, a bill of quantities (B.O.Q), a set of contract terms and conditions, and other details, can be viewed/downloaded from the departmental website [www.jktenders.gov.in](http://www.jktenders.gov.in) on the dates tabulated below:

1	Date of Issue of Tender Notice	20.02.2026
2	Period of downloading of bidding documents	20.02.2026 (4:00 PM) to 27.02.2026 (6:00PM)
3	Bid submission Start Date	20.02.2026 (4:00 PM)
4	Bid Submission End Date	27.02.2026 (6:00PM)
5	Date & time of opening of Bids (Online)	28.02.2026 (12:00 Noon) In the Office of Executive Engineer R&B Division Kralpora.

Upload/Disclose the bank account number which is linked with the GSTIN along with proof. No payments shall be released by the department to any other bank account except the one linked with the GST registered number of the successful bidder.

2. Bids must be accompanied with Cost of Tender Document in the shape of **Treasury Challan (dated between the bid start date and the Bid Submission End date)** deposited in M.H. 0059 in favour of Executive Engineer R&B Division Kralpora (tender inviting authority). Treasury Challan must be written boldly and clearly with Name of Work, Name of the Contractor along with Contact No, NIT No and Serial No of Work on NIT (if any).
3. At the time of tendering, all bidders must upload earnest money/bid security equal to 2% of the Advertised Cost in the form of CDR/FDR pledged to the tender receiving authority, i.e. Executive Engineer R&B Division Kralpora. Besides that, the successful bidder will have to provide Performance Security @ 5% of the allotted Cost in the form of CDR/FDR at the time of contract award, strictly in accordance with the Government's circular instructions from time to time. The earnest money/bid security of 2% will be released to the successful bidder only after the submission of a Performance Security of 5% of the allotted cost, which will be released after successful completion of the DLP/Maintenance Period.
11. The key construction material shall have to be arranged by the contractor of his own as per the quality/specifications.
  - a. Cement = JKOPC Brand
  - b. Steel of all sorts = SAIL certified (The SAIL certificate shall be produced /deposited in the division by the AEE concerned at the time of submission of the work done bills). No excess in quantities/Cost is allowed in any case without prior information.
12. All other Conditions shall remain same as per the DETAILED TENDER NOTICE No 01/RnB/Kralpora of 2025-26 E-tendering Dated:- 16-04-2025 issued under No. Div-KRLP/123-37 dated 16-04-2025 and PWD Form 25 (Double agreement Form)
13. Bidders should be fully cognizant that if the documents uploaded/submitted on the basis of which the contract was awarded are later discovered to be fake/not genuine, the contract will be cancelled and the Contractor/bidder will be blacklisted from participating in this Division/Department for a period of three years, in addition to the performance security deposited for the said work being forfeited.

**Sd/- Executive Engineer  
R&B Division Kralpora**

DIPK: 11205/25 | Dated: 21-02-2026

## DC Doda flags off 6th National Rafting Championship at Shibnote (Premnagar)

■ HT NEWS NETWORK

**DODA, FEBRUARY 21:** The Directorate of Tourism Jammu in collaboration with the district administration Doda successfully commenced the 6th National Rafting Championship at Shibnote (Premnagar) marking the beginning of an exhilarating four-day adventure sports event titled "The Ultimate River Battle," scheduled from February 19 to February 22, 2026.

The championship was flagged off today by Deputy Commissioner (DC) Doda, Harvinder Singh along with SSP, Sandeep Kumar Mehta and Joint Director Tourism Jammu at the scenic rafting site of Shibnote (Premnagar).

Senior officers and dignitaries were present on the occasion, including ADC Baderwah, SDM Thathri, Chief Planning Officer (CPO), Assistant Commissioner Development (ACD), Tehsildar and other district



officers and officials.

The event also witnessed enthusiastic participation from sports persons, artists, locals and

tourists from various states, adding vibrancy and excitement to the championship.

The Deputy Commissioner

applauded the participants for their enthusiastic spirit and active participation.

He also commended the dedicated efforts of the Tourism Department and all stakeholders involved in organizing the event.

The DC emphasized that such large-scale adventure sports initiatives play a vital role in showcasing the natural beauty of the region and unlocking the immense tourism potential of Doda district.

The National Rafting Championship has brought together skilled rafting teams competing amid the thrilling waters and picturesque landscapes of the region, promoting adventure tourism while boosting local engagement and economic activity.

The programme will conclude tomorrow, February 22, 2026, with closing ceremonies and recognition of outstanding performances.

## DC Kathua reviews progress of RDD schemes; stresses timely completion with data accuracy

■ HT NEWS NETWORK

**KATHUA, FEBRUARY 21:** Deputy Commissioner Kathua, Rajesh Sharma today chaired a meeting to review the progress of various schemes being implemented by the Rural Development Department (RDD) in the district.

During the meeting, Assistant Commissioner Development (ACD) Akhil Sadotra briefed the chair on the status of works under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). It was informed that 82.96 percent of e-KYC verification has been completed so far. The Deputy Commissioner directed the concerned officers to ensure 100 percent completion of e-KYC at the earliest and emphasized proper updation and purification of uploaded data to maintain transparency and accuracy.

The progress achieved in terms of person days generation, timely payment of wages, conduct of social audits and geo-tagging of assets was also reviewed threadbare. The DC stressed on expediting works and maintaining strict adherence to guidelines.

Reviewing the implementation of Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana - Gramin (PMAY-G), it was informed that the scheme has achieved 95 percent progress in the district. The Deputy Commissioner directed the officers to ensure saturation of targets within the stipulated time frame.

ACP, Ajit Kumar apprised the meeting about the progress under Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA), informing that 44 additional rooms have been completed against the target of 49. The DC called for timely completion of the remaining works.

The meeting also reviewed the implementation of Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), Individual Household Latrines (IHHL) and Natural Resource Management (NRM) works. The Deputy Commissioner underscored the need for close coordination among departments to achieve desired results and ensure holistic development and welfare of the rural population.

The DC called for focused efforts, effective monitoring and inter-departmental synergy to achieve tangible outcomes on the ground.

CPO Kathua Ranjeet Thakur, BDOs besides other concerned were also present.

## DC Kathua chairs meeting to review preparations for SANJY 2026

■ HT NEWS NETWORK

**KATHUA, FEBRUARY 21:** Deputy Commissioner Kathua, Rajesh Sharma today chaired a meeting to discuss preparatory arrangements for the forthcoming Shri Amarnath Ji Yatra (SANJY), 2026.

At the outset, the Deputy Commissioner reviewed in detail the logistics to be put in place at the Lakhanpur Yatri Facilitation Centre and allied locations to ensure smooth movement and comfortable stay of pilgrims. Threadbare discussions were held regarding augmentation of basic amenities including sanitation, water and power supply, lodging facilities, traffic management and healthcare arrangements.



The meeting also deliberated on strengthening and upgrading facilities at the identified lodgement centres to cater to the anticipated influx of yatrias. The concerned departments were directed to prepare a comprehensive and time-bound action plan, clearly outlining the activities and works to be undertaken so that timely projections could be submitted to higher authorities for necessary approvals and support.

The Deputy Commissioner directed the officers of Municipalities, PWD, PDD, PHE, RDD, Animal Husbandry and Information Department to work in close coordination and ensure meticulous planning for seamless execution of arrangements, aimed at providing a pleasant and hassle-free yatra experience to the pilgrims.

Among others, ADC Vishavjeet Singh, CPO Ranjeet Thakur, ACD Akhil Sadotra and other concerned officers attended the meeting.

## Entrepreneurship cum Awareness Mela under Mission YUVA held at Nagri Parole

■ HT NEWS NETWORK

**KATHUA, FEBRUARY 21:** In a bid to promote self-employment and entrepreneurship among the youth, the District Employment and Counselling Centre in collaboration with the district administration Kathua today organized a one-day Potential Entrepreneurship-cum-Awareness Mela under Mission YUVA at Nagri Parole.

The mela was aimed at generating awareness among local youth about various self-employment opportunities available under different government-sponsored entrepreneurship development programmes and motivating them to avail advantage of the support mechanisms provided under Mission YUVA.

At the outset, Assistant Director Employment, Piyusha Khajuria, delivered a detailed presentation on Mission YUVA, outlining its objectives, key features, eligibility criteria and facilitation support available to aspiring entrepreneurs.

Additional District Development Commissioner Kathua, Surender Mohan Sharma along with other officers and officials of stakeholder departments attended the programme.

Addressing the gathering, the ADDC appreciated the enthusiastic participation of the youth and emphasized the importance of such outreach programmes in fostering an entrepreneurial ecosystem at the grassroots level. He stated that Mission YUVA is a transformative initiative aimed



at nurturing entrepreneurial talent, generating sustainable employment opportunities and promoting self-reliance among the younger generation.

Experts from the stakeholder departments sensitized the participants about various schemes under Mission YUVA, including the registration process, financial assistance, handholding support and other benefits available to eligible candidates.

The programme also featured interaction sessions wherein successful entrepreneurs shared their experiences and highlighted the positive impact of government initiatives on their ventures, inspiring aspiring youth to pursue self-employment as a viable career option.

A large number of youth and locals attended the mela.

## CTI Srinagar organizes programme on "Strengthening Cooperatives through Good Governance"

■ HT NEWS NETWORK

**JAMMU, FEBRUARY 21:** The Cooperative Training Institute, Srinagar, organized a programme on "Strengthening Cooperatives through Good Governance", followed by the felicitation and certificate distribution ceremony of the Diploma in Cooperative Management (DICM) for the trainees.

The programme highlighted the critical role of good governance in strengthening the cooperative institutions. Deliberations focused on transparency, accountability, professional management, statutory compliance and active member participation as the foundation for strong and sustainable cooperatives. The speakers emphasised that good governance is essential for improving the performance and public trust in cooperative institutions.

Babila Rakwal, Commissioner Secretary, Cooperative Department, Babila Rakwal, felicitated the



successful DICM trainees while distributing the diploma certificates among them.

Special Secretary, Cooperative Department, Ulfat Jabeen and Principal, Cooperative Training Institute, Srinagar, Dr Khalid Hussain Malik besides others were present on the occasion.

The dignitaries congratulated the trainees for successfully completing the diploma and encouraged them to apply their knowledge in strengthening the cooperative societies through

ethical and efficient practices.

The Deputy Registrars, Assistant Registrars, District Audit Officers besides Auditors, Sub Auditors and Junior Supervisors were sensitised regarding the good governance for strengthening the co-operatives.

The programme concluded with a reaffirmation of the Institute's commitment to capacity building, modernization of cooperative education and promotion of good governance within the cooperative sector.

## Relief Commissioner reviews integration of migrant ration cards into NFSA database

■ HT NEWS NETWORK

**JAMMU, FEBRUARY 21:** A detailed meeting was held under the chairmanship of Relief and Rehabilitation Commissioner (M) J&K, Dr. Arvind Karwani to review the progress of integration of ration cards of Kashmiri and Jammu migrants on the National Food Security Act (NFSA) database and extension of benefits of social sector schemes to migrant beneficiaries.

Deputy Commissioner (Relief), Assistant Commissioners of Relief Organization, Deputy Director FCS&CA, Assistant Director, FCS&CA, Assistant Director Planning, Zonal Officers / Camp Commandants of the Relief Organization, concerned Tehsildars of different districts of Jammu Province and officials from different line departments attended the meeting.

The Relief & Rehabilitation Commissioner (M) highlighted the importance of time bound completion of the exercise of integration of migrant ration cards of Kashmiri and Jammu Migrants, in terms of the government notifications issued on the subject, wherein the necessary amendments in the Jammu and Kashmir Food Security Rules, 2021 and Targeted Public Distribution (Control) Order 2023, have been done to enable migrants to avail the benefit of various Government schemes, without affecting the extant scale of ration distribution and migrant status.

The migrant beneficiaries were not earlier able to avail benefit of various social sector schemes like old pensions, scholarships and marriage assistance due to the fact that their ration cards were non-digitized and not integrated with the national database. After the launching of the new PDS portal by the Department of Food, Civil Supplies & Consumer Affairs, the process of integration of about 50,000 migrant families into the national database has now been initiated. More than 3000 families have so far been identified for extending benefits of various social sector schemes and after integration on the NFSA database. About 320 families have already been sanctioned assistance under social sector schemes since December 2025. The migrants were also facing difficulties in availing benefits under Ayushman Bharat Scheme, which has also been redressed after transition into the NFSA database.

It was enjoined upon all the officers to ensure time bound completion of the exercise of integration of all migrant ration cards and ensure that all preparations are in place to ensure uninterrupted ration supply as per the new dispensation from the coming financial year. Dr Karwani impressed upon all the officers to regularly organize outreach camps to facilitate public in integration of their NFSA applications and to avail benefit of various social sector schemes.

## J&K Judicial Academy organises training on "Power and Duties of Drawing and Disbursing Officer including GeM Training"

■ HT NEWS NETWORK

**JAMMU, FEBRUARY 21:** Under the patronage of Chief Justice, High Court of Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh (Patron-in-Chief, J&K Judicial Academy), Arun Palli and guidance of Chairperson and members of Governing Committee for J&K Judicial Academy, the Jammu & Kashmir Judicial Academy today organised a one day Refresher Training Programme (A-061/25) on "Power and Duties of Drawing and Disbursing Officer including GeM Training" at its Janipur Campus, Jammu.

The programme was conducted for the Judicial Officers and Nazirs/Buyers dealing with Government e-Marketplace (GeM) of Jammu Province. The programme commenced with registration of the participants followed by introduction by Naseer Ahmad



Dar, Director, J&K Judicial Academy.

In his address, the Director underscored the importance of financial discipline, accountability and digital procurement systems in strengthening the institutional efficiency and transparency within the judicial system.

The first and second sessions conducted by Sarthak Khoda, GeM Trainer, who provided an in-depth overview of the Government

e-Marketplace platform. The sessions covered registration and onboarding processes, procurement workflow, order placement, contract management, billing, invoicing and payment reconciliation.

The resource person also apprised the participants of recent features and policy updates on GeM and addressed practical challenges faced by stakeholders.

The technical sessions were also graced by Amir Ali, Senior Assistant Director, Government e-Marketplace, whose presence added value to the deliberations.

The third and fourth sessions were delivered by Er. Jagteshwar Singh, Accounts Officer, Civil Aviation Department, J&K. He elaborated on the legal and administrative framework governing the role of Drawing and Disbursing Officers, including powers and duties under General Financial Rules (GFRs), Treasury Rules and Financial Codes.

The sessions further focused on budgetary control, expenditure management, maintenance of financial records, preparation and submission of bills, advances and recoveries, pension matters, GPF/NPS issues, audit procedures, and common objections.

The technical sessions were

also attended by Sandeep Singh Manhas, FA/CAO, High Court of Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh, whose august presence enriched the deliberations.

The programme concluded with an interactive session, wherein the participants actively engaged with the resource persons, raised queries and shared field-level experiences.

The interactive deliberations enriched the learning experience and clarified practical aspects of financial compliance and procurement procedures.

The refresher programme forms part of the Academy's ongoing commitment to capacity building of judicial officers and ministerial staff, ensuring enhanced efficiency, transparency and accountability in financial administration and procurement processes within the judicial system.

# SpiceJet doubles market share amid rapid capacity expansion

UNITED NEWS OF INDIA

**NEW DELHI, FEB 21:** SpiceJet on Friday recorded a sharp improvement in its domestic market position, with its market share more than doubling from 1.9 per cent in September 2025 to 4.3 per cent in December 2025, highlighting the airline's rapid operational recovery and capacity-led growth. According to the official statement of the airline, the surge comes on the back of a 56 per cent increase in capacity during Q3, driven by the induction of 16 new aircraft.

This expansion allowed SpiceJet to widen its network, improve schedules, and attract more passengers across key domestic markets. Building on this momentum, the airline doubled its capacity in the last quarter, with Available Seat Kilometres (ASKMs) rising from around 55 crore to 105 crore.

"SpiceJet plans to more than



double its capacity over the course of the year, targeting 220 crore ASKM by winter this year, while operating over 300 daily flights across its network," the release

read.

To support this growth, SpiceJet is working to expand its fleet to around 60 aircraft through a combination of wet and damp

leases, as well as phased returns of previously grounded planes.

Additionally, the airline has signed a Memorandum of Understanding for the induction

of 10 more aircraft.

Debasis Maharshi, Chief Business Officer of SpiceJet, said, "The sharp rise in our market share over a short period reflects the progress we have made in rebuilding capacity and restoring our network."

"Doubling capacity in the last quarter and expanding our fleet during Q3 have helped us regain presence across key routes. As we work towards more than doubling our capacity this year, our focus remains on strengthening connectivity, improving reliability, and scaling up in a measured and sustainable manner," Maharshi further said in his statement.

SpiceJet, known for making flying more affordable for Indians, operates a fleet of Boeing 737s and Q-400s and is one of the largest regional carriers in the country. Many of its flights feature SpiceMax, the most spacious economy-class seating in India, reinforcing its appeal among domestic travellers. UNI

## CPI(M) demands removal of Hardeep Singh Puri from union Cabinet over 'Epstein Files' allegations

UNITED NEWS OF INDIA

**NEW DELHI, FEB 21:** The Communist Party of India (Marxist) has Friday demanded the immediate removal of Petroleum and Natural Gas Minister Hardeep Singh Puri from the Central Cabinet, citing alleged links to revelations emerging from what it described as the "Epstein Files."

In a statement, the CPI(M) termed the contents of the files as "extremely repulsive and abhorrent," alleging that they expose a powerful global network of politicians, financial elites, technology leaders and celebrities linked to convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.



"Extremely repulsive and abhorrent content of the Epstein Files are unraveling on a daily basis," the CPI(M) Politbureau said in its statement, alleging attempts by the US authorities to suppress information. It claimed that "there is no iota of doubt about the aggressive criminal nature and impunity of the network involving the power elite... of which Epstein was the chief facilitator."

The Left party further alleged that "despite clear evidence of the involvement of Minister Hardeep Singh Puri, and industrialist Anil Ambani, there is no attempt by the central government to force explanation and ensure accountability."

The CPI(M) also accused the government of blocking parliamentary scrutiny. "The union government has disallowed any discussion on the Epstein Files on the floor of Parliament," the statement added. It further alleged that Puri "has been caught lying in his own press conference" and claimed that "instead of being sacked, Hardeep Singh Puri is being protected by all devious means."

Calling the issue a matter of national credibility, the Politbureau said, "In these circumstances, the Prime Minister must remove Hardeep Singh Puri from the union Cabinet, to redeem national embarrassment and shame."

The CPI(M)'s demand comes amid renewed global attention on documents and investigations related to Epstein's network. In several countries, public figures have faced scrutiny, legal proceedings or reputational damage following disclosures linked to the case.

The controversy is likely to intensify in the coming days, with opposition parties expected to press for discussion in Parliament and seek clarifications from the government. UNI

## Delhi Speaker to address 15th 'Indian Student Parliament' in Pune

UNITED NEWS OF INDIA

**NEW DELHI, FEB 21:** Delhi Legislative Assembly Speaker Vijender Gupta will address the inaugural session of the 15th Indian Student Parliament in Pune on Saturday. Gupta will deliver the keynote address, followed by an interactive question-and-answer session with youth participants.

During the student parliament themed "From Stadium to Statesmanship: What Can Politics Learn from Sports?", Gupta's address will focus on drawing parallels between the spirit of sportsmanship and the ideals of public life, which will highlight how



values such as teamwork, discipline, resilience, integrity and respect for rules can strengthen democratic institutions and improve standards of governance.

The event will also be attended by Member of Parliament Anurag Singh Thakur, noted scientist and Padma Vibhushan awardee RA Mashelkar, and senior journalists among other distinguished dignitaries from various fields.

Emphasising ethical conduct and collective responsibility in public service, Gupta is expected to underline the importance of merit over manipulation, purpose over personal gain, and unity over division.

He will stress that both stadia and legislatures demand leadership rooted in perseverance, humility and fairness. The Speaker is also likely to call upon young citizens to carry forward the values of honesty, focus and national pride into public life, inspiring them to champion integrity, inclusivity and collaborative leadership in service of the nation. UNI

## IYC protest at AI Summit sparks political slugfest, BJP slams Congress for tarnishing the country's image

### Congress Tarnished the Country's Image: BJP

UNITED NEWS OF INDIA

**NEW DELHI, FEB 21:** The Delhi Police is mulling lodging an FIR against workers of the Indian Youth Congress (IYC) who staged a protest at the India AI Impact Summit 2026 at Bharat Mandapam on Friday. The unexpected protest by IYC workers has sparked a political slugfest between ruling BJP and the opposition Congress.

Raising the slogan that "the PM is compromised" a dozen-odd IYC volunteers organised a protest at the India AI Impact Summit venue at Bharat Mandapam in the morning leaving the organisers of the event unprepared and off guard. Although the protesters have been arrested and removed later, a political demonstration at a global event venue like AI Summit has sparked an unnecessary debate in the country.

While Indian Youth Congress has justified their protest saying that in a country where the media system and

the PM himself "is compromised", there are not any platforms left for the people to express their dissent, the Bharatiya Janata Party has said that the Congress has "brought shame" to the country by organising a protest at such a venue.

"This was not done by a few small workers. It was well planned. They only wanted to defame the AI Summit at any cost," the BJP said.

National President of the Indian Youth Congress, Uday Bhanu Chib, said, "PM is compromised" is not just a slogan but the anger of millions of unemployed youth. This trade deal with the US is a betrayal of the interests of our farmers and the public, and it will benefit only the US. Peaceful protest is our right in a democracy, and we will continue to raise the voice of the youth."

Chib also stated that they were not against the AI Summit but against any compromise with India's interests.

"When the country's farmers are being compromised, anti-India trade

agreements are being signed, and youth are being pushed into hate politics while remaining unemployed, should we stay silent? This country belongs to 1.4 billion citizens," he said.

"If the Prime Minister is compromised, it does not mean the public should remain silent. If we know how to follow the path shown by Mahatma Gandhi, we also know how to follow the path shown by Sardar Bhagat Singh. We will never allow the interests of the country's youth and farmers to be compromised. When we protest on the streets, we are stopped. Social media posts against the government are removed under the guise of IT rules. So what recourse do we have? We are against any compromise with India's interests, which is why we held this protest today," he said.

Sources in the Delhi Police said they are seeking legal opinion before lodging an FIR in the matter. UNI

## Akasa Air flies over 10,000 pets since launch of 'Pets on Akasa' service

UNITED NEWS OF INDIA

**NEW DELHI, FEB 21:** Akasa Air, India's fastest-growing airline, has reached a remarkable milestone, having flown over 10,000 pets since the launch of its 'Pets on Akasa' service in November 2022.

According to officials, the achievement underscores the airline's position as one of the country's most dependable and pet-friendly carriers, offering safety, comfort, and convenience to pet parents across India.

The milestone was marked by celebrating the journey of the 10,000th pet traveller, Topshie, on flight QP 1559 from Mumbai to Kolkata. Akasa Air organised a small on-ground ceremony at check-in, complete with photographs, videos, and special giveaways for Topshie's owner.

The occasion was also acknowledged onboard and upon arrival in Kolkata, highlighting the airline's commitment to creating memorable travel experiences for pets and their families.

Since its introduction, the 'Pets on Akasa' service has witnessed growing demand across key domestic routes.

Festive months from October to December saw the highest pet travel, accounting for nearly 35% of annual journeys, with monthly volumes up by 63%.

Pets of all breeds, from Labradors and Golden Retrievers to Shih Tzus and indigenous breeds, have embraced the skies, indicating the mainstreaming of pet travel.

Beyond metro cities, strong demand has emerged from Tier II

and Tier III markets, with Guwahati among the most popular routes. Of the 10,000 pets flown, 60% were dogs and 40% were cats, with 93% travelling in-cabin, reflecting pet parents' preference to keep their pets close.

Loyalty among pet parents is evident, with one passenger having flown 26 times with his miniature poodle Romeo on the Mumbai-Goa route.

Commenting on the milestone, Naarayan T V, Chief Marketing Officer, Akasa Air, said, "By actively listening to feedback and enhancing

our service, we have earned strong loyalty."

"Over a quarter of pet parents have travelled with us more than once, which reflects the trust they place in the experience. This milestone reinforces our commitment to making pet travel in India safer, more comfortable, and stress-free," he added.

With this achievement, Akasa Air continues to set new benchmarks for pet-friendly air travel in India, making it easier for families to include their furry companions on every journey. UNI

## Obituary: Legendary Writer Sankar goes into the 'Great Unknown'

Joyanta Roy Chowdhury

**NEW DELHI/KOLKATA, FEB 21:** Mani Sankar Mukherjee, the legendary Bengali language writer whose bestsellers 'Kato Ajanare' (The Great Unknown), 'Chowringhee', 'Seemabaddha' (Company Limited) and 'Jana Aranya' (The Middleman), were translated into many languages and made into movies by famous directors, including Satyajit Ray, is no more. He died on Friday after a fortnight-long illness during which he was shifted to a local Kolkata hospital. This writer met Sankar for the first time in the midst of Covid in 2021 at a small flat on South Kolkata's Bondel Road, which had books spilling over from racks, peeping from under the sofa and spread all over his dining table, competing for space with the tea cups and jars of biscuits.

This was the famed novelist's den where he sat and spun stories based on the myriad characters he met and the society in which they

lived.

Those novels which engrossed millions of readers in Bengali as also the many languages into which he has been translated including English, Hindi, Malayalam, Gujarati, French and Spanish, form a body of literature which capture the spirit of the Indian middle class as it evolved in the 1960s and 1970s.

Mukherjee who turned 92 last December was going through a phase of rediscovery by younger readers, when this writer last spoke to him, after new editions and translations of his books by brilliant translators such as Arunava Sinha started coming out in this decade.

In the life of Mani Sankar Mukherjee, who signed his books simply as Sankar, admiration arrived early, and from the most fastidious of quarters.

One morning, when his novel 'Seemabaddha', a cool, unsparring study of the corporate race and Kolkata's rarefied "Boxwallah" culture appeared in the Puja annual number of Anandabazar Patrika, the

telephone rang.

On the line was Satyajit Ray. In his unmistakable baritone, Ray delivered a message at once courteous and proprietary: would Mukherjee, please, refrain from selling the film rights to anyone without first informing him? He was interested. Ray had been, Mukherjee recalled, a fast reader. The Puja magazine arrived with the morning newspapers; within hours of finishing the novel, the director had made his claim.

The resulting film, 'Seemabaddha', released in English as Company Limited, joined Ray's celebrated Calcutta trilogy alongside 'Pratidwandi', based on the novel by Sunil Gangopadhyay, and 'Jana Aranya', adapted from another of Mukherjee's own works.

The film went on to win a prize at the Venice Biennale the year after its release, sealing the unlikely partnership between the quiet chronicler of clerks and tycoons and the maestro of Bengali cinema.

Mukherjee's readers were not

confined to cineastes. Jyoti Basu, the austere CPI(M) leader who became West Bengal's longest-serving chief minister, once told him, with a candour bordering on nostalgia, "I keep reading you ... but I used to read you much more when I was in jail."

The metamorphosis of a High Court clerk into a novelist had been, by his own telling, an act of gratitude. In the 1950s, Mukherjee worked for Noel Barwell, the last English barrister to practice at the Calcutta High Court.

That relationship went on to extend beyond the contractual.

Barwell took the young clerk to the movies and out to dinner; he treated him, Mukherjee felt, as a companion rather than a subordinate. When Barwell died, Mukherjee was seized by the desire to commemorate the man "who thought so well of me." He had saved Rs 400, no small sum then, and imagined a statue or an oil portrait. Friends dissuaded him; memorialising a man in marble required a fortune. UNI

## SC orders deployment of judicial officers for SIR in Bengal

UNITED NEWS OF INDIA

**NEW DELHI, FEB 21:** The Supreme Court on Friday ordered Calcutta High Court to depute current and former judicial officers to help with the SIR process in the state.

A bench comprising Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justices Joymalya Bagchi and N V Anjaria also sought a status report on alleged incidents of violence in the state.

The court said there is an unfortunate "blame game of allegations and counter allegations, which shows a trust deficit between two constitutional functionaries - that is, the state government and the Election Commission of India".

The court acknowledged that this direction may impact the hearing of normal court cases since judges' time will be taken up for the SIR exercise. Thus, the top court directed that the Calcutta High Court Chief Justice, along with a committee of judges, the Registrar General, and the principal district judges, may take a call to shift interim relief cases to an alternate court for a week or 10 days.



After the ECI said that it can publish the final list after February 28, but the SIR process can still go on, the Court said that if the process is completed, then the list can be published after February 28, and such a list shall not be taken as the final one, and then a supplementary list shall be published. UNI

# Buttler 'frustrated' by World Cup form but won't rein himself in

UNITED NEWS OF INDIA

**MUMBAI:** Jos Buttler is "frustrated" by his lean run at the T20 World Cup but has insisted that he will not compromise his attacking intent to play himself back into form in the Super Eight stage. Buttler went past 4,000 T20I runs during England's win over Italy on Monday but only 53 of those have come in his four innings at this World Cup. He has had a lean run with the bat since the end of the English summer, with a single half-century across his past 16 T20 innings for England and Durban's Super Giants, and a top score of 38 in five ODI innings this winter.

He started the World Cup with scores of 26 and 21 against Nepal and West Indies respectively, and was out for 3 against both Scotland and Italy with near-identical dismissals, caught at mid-off trying to hit a seamer over the infield in the Powerplay.

"I'm a bit frustrated, to be honest," Buttler said on his For the Love of Cricket podcast. "I felt like I was playing really well in South Africa, in the SA20, without getting scores. One thing I'd always pride myself on in T20s is, if you get in, to be able to go on and make a good contribution. I found myself getting out in the teens and twenties quite a bit, getting starts and then finding ways to get out."

"I think [I have been] maybe almost trying a bit too hard, as opposed to just being a bit relaxed at the crease and letting it happen. The first two games, I got in, 20-odds, and not managing to go on and make those telling contributions is frustrating. And then a couple of low scores against Scotland and Italy... T20, you want to be positive and get on with it, but [I] made

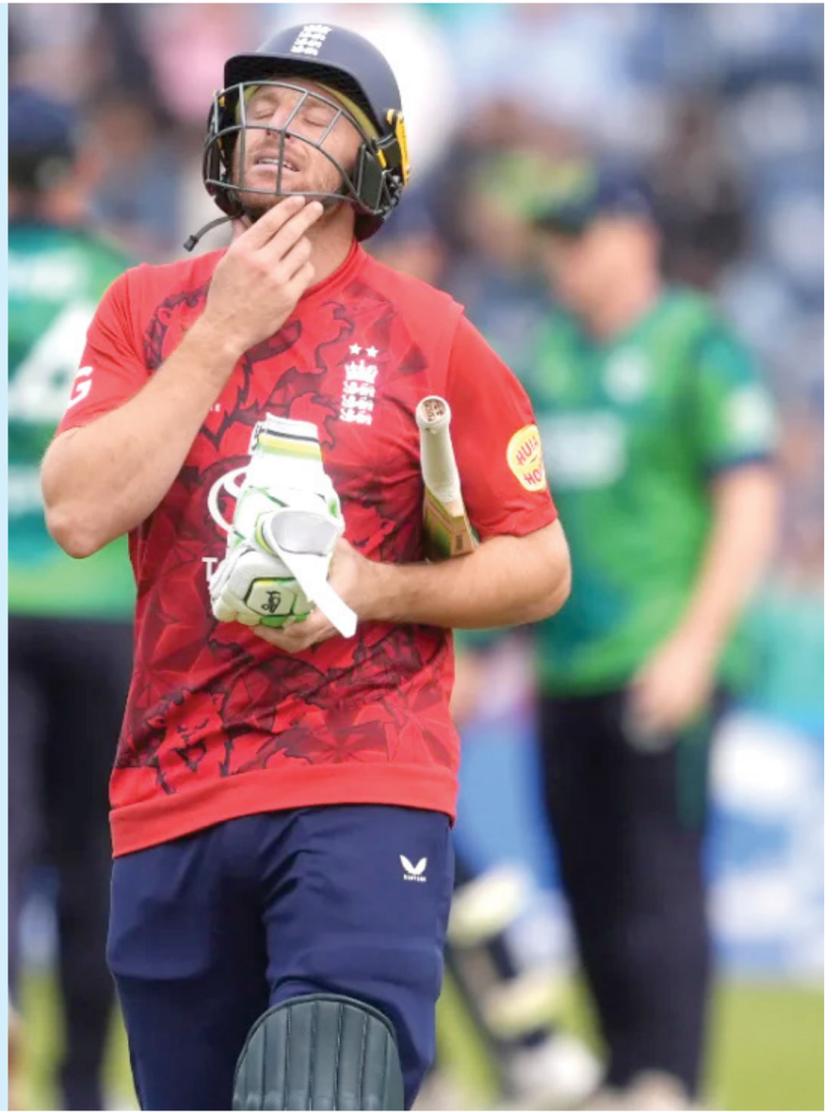
a couple of mistakes and got out.

"I love batting and I love playing cricket and I love scoring runs. As much as you're frustrated with your form and you want to obviously contribute to the team, part of cricket is I love batting, and so not doing as much batting as you would like is frustrating. It's just trying to remember the things that you do well at your best and trying to take each game as it comes."

Nasser Hussain encouraged Buttler to "give yourself a bit of a chance" on Sky Sports' coverage after England's win over Italy, which sealed their progress to the Super Eight stage where they will face Sri Lanka, Pakistan and New Zealand. But Buttler said that the demands of T20 cricket are not conducive to batters playing within themselves in a bid to rediscover their form. "T20 is one of those games that asks you to keep making plays," he said. "At times, when you've been out of form in a Test match, a batting coach might say, 'Just rein it in for a bit, and try and bat for an hour, and it will come back to you - just by hook or by crook, bat for an hour.'"

"But in T20 you've got to keep playing the scoreboard. If you're chasing 10 an over, you've got to play accordingly. I saw Nasser saying, 'Just bat for 15 overs' and I'd love to just bat for 15 overs, but I don't want to bat for 15 overs just for myself and ignore the game. You've got to still play the game."

"I guess he's just saying give yourself a chance, just get yourself in, and they are all the things that you want to do anyway. The game just keeps challenging you. No matter what stage of your career at, there's always something challenging you... I pride myself on my own performance."



## Keshav Maharaj to lead South Africa for T20I series in New Zealand

UNITED NEWS OF INDIA

**AHMEDABAD:** Left-arm spinner Keshav Maharaj will lead South Africa's 15-member squad for a T20I series in New Zealand beginning on March 15, a week after the conclusion of the 2026 T20 World Cup in India.

The five-match series ends on March 25, and with the IPL expected to begin on March 26, a number of South African players who are part of the T20 World Cup squad have been given a break from the tour. Maharaj, George Linde and Jason Smith are the only players currently in India who will be travelling to New Zealand.

There are five uncapped players in the squad: Connor Esterhuizen, Dian Forrester, Jordan Hermann, Eathan Bosch and Ngqobani Mokoena. Jordan Hermann is the brother of Rubin Hermann, who is also in the squad, while Eathan Bosch is the younger sibling of Corbin Bosch.

Mokoena, 19, was the joint fourth-highest wicket-taker in the 2026 SA20, claiming 13 wickets for Paarl Royals at a strike rate of 14.76.

Fast bowlers Ottneil Baartman and Gerald Coetzee, who were not included in the T20 World Cup squad, have been picked, and Tony de Zorzi makes a comeback after being sidelined by injury.

"With this series taking place directly after the T20 World Cup, the majority of that squad will return home, which creates a great opportunity for this group of players to step into the international environment and show what they're about at this level," South Africa's head coach Shukri Conrad said. "Keshav has experience captaining the Proteas and has led two teams to the SA20 finals. His leadership and calm presence make him the ideal person to lead this group on this tour."

"The batting unit is particularly exciting for this tour. Tony brings experience to the top order, while Connor, Dian and Jordan have all demonstrated the ability to play positive, attacking cricket for their domestic teams. Ngqobani showed during SA20 that he is an exciting young quick with the ability to make an impact and this series will give him the perfect opportunity to expose him to the international setup."

The South Africa women's side is also touring New Zealand for T20Is during the same period and the fixtures of the two series will be played as double-headers on the same day.

# ECB push back at Pakistan 'shadow-ban' reports ahead of Hundred auction

UNITED NEWS OF INDIA

**LONDON:** Shaheen Shah Afridi, Shadab Khan and Haris Rauf are among more than 950 players to have registered for the Hundred's inaugural auctions next month, as the ECB faces scrutiny over whether new Indian investors will effect an IPL-style 'shadow ban' on Pakistani players.

No active Pakistan international has featured in the IPL since the 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai, and only a handful of players have appeared for foreign

franchises run by IPL ownership groups since their global expansion.

Richard Gould, the ECB's chief executive, insisted last year that the involvement of Pakistani players in the Hundred would be unaffected by the league's privatisation, with four franchises now part-owned or fully run by IPL ownership groups.

But the BBC reported on Thursday that no IPL-owned Hundred teams will bid for Pakistani players at the auctions next month, citing messages from a "senior

official" at the ECB to an agent. The ECB say that they have not been shown the messages in question and pushed back against the story, but Michael Vaughan, the former England captain, urged the board to address the issue more proactively.

"The ECB need to act fast on this," Vaughan wrote on X. "They own the league and this should not be allowed to happen... the most inclusive sport in the country is not one that allows this to happen." ESPNcricinfo has learned that more than 50 Pakistani play-

ers - including Afridi, Shadab, Rauf, Saim Ayub and Usman Tariq - have registered for next month's draft, which will be held in Piccadilly, London on March 11 (women's) and 12 (men's).

Babar Azam and Mohammad Rizwan are notable absentees from the longlist of nominated players, though in any case their availability would be significantly limited by Pakistan's scheduled Test series against West Indies in August. Pakistan's limited-overs teams are not due to play in the Hundred's window from July 21

to August 16.

Mustafizur Rahman, the Bangladesh seamer whose contract with Kolkata Knight Riders was cancelled last month at the BCCI's request, has also registered for the Hundred auction.

Only nine Pakistani players have featured in the first five seasons of the Hundred, with teams often reluctant to sign them on account of clashes with international fixtures and a handful of high-profile, late-notice withdrawals, including Afridi and Naseem Shah in 2024.

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